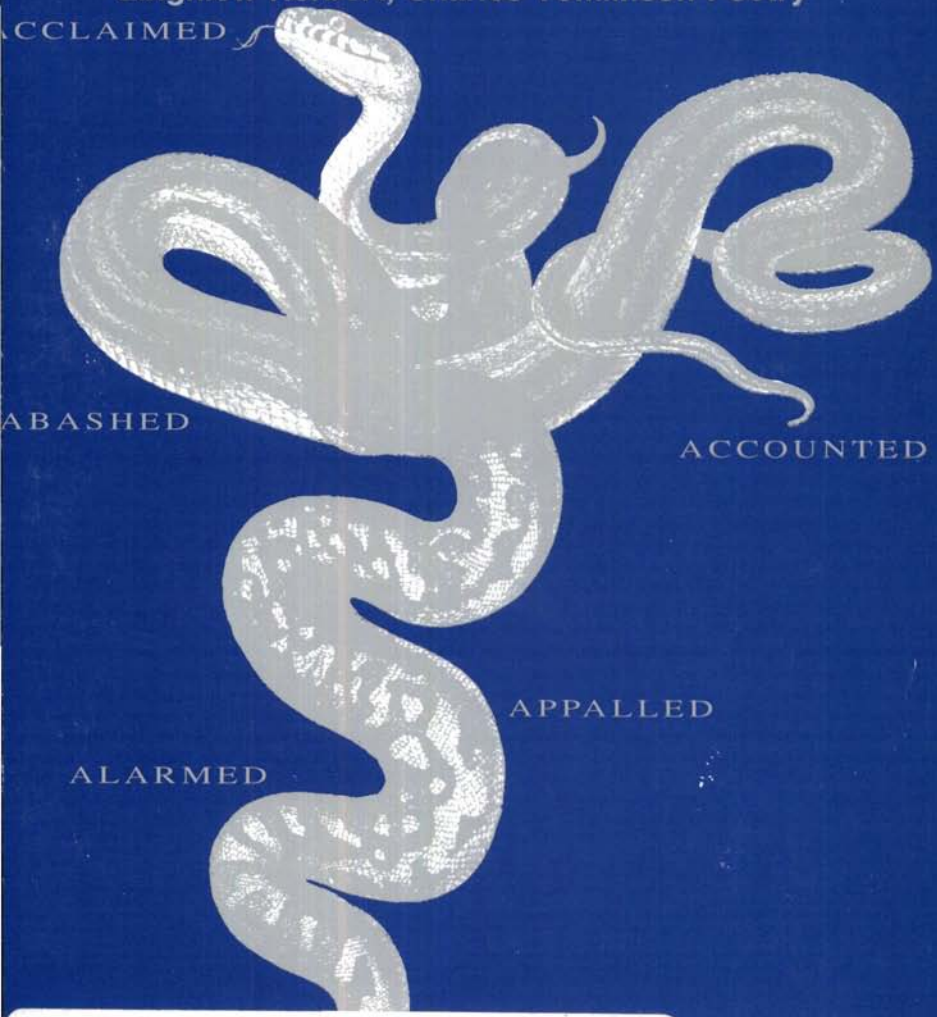
The Paris Review

121 $7.00 £4 40F

Harold Brodkey, Reynolds Price Interviews
Susan Minot, Paul West Fiction, Donald Hall Feature
Zbigniew Herbert, Charles Tomlinson Poetry



805
P36
V.34.no.121 Winter 1991
Dup

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE PUSHCART PRIZE XVI

1991 1992

BEST OF THE SMALL PRESSES

EDITED BY BILL HENDERSON WITH THE PUSHCART PRIZE EDITORS

JUST PUBLISHED
574 PAGES
CLOTH BOUND
$28.50

PUSHCART PRESS
P.O. BOX 380
WAINSCOTT, N.Y. 11975
(516) 324-9300

THE REVIEWS FOR THIS EDITION

"This annual anthology of the best stories, essays and poetry published by small presses continues to illustrate that highly literary standards can survive despite the power wielded by profit-hungry publishing behemoths."

PUBLISHERS WEEKL

"Once again, Henderson's annual sampling of the nation's small presses astonishes with its variety and energy. . . must reading for anyone interested in the present and future of American arts and letters."

KIRKUS REVIEW

". . . writers in this year's Pushcart Prize add color and meaning to our days."

LIBRARY JOURNA

". . . a regular favorite of readers. It's also a must-hav for libraries, for this diversified anthology genuinely reflects the state of the literary arts in the U.S. today unlike established, mainstream literature collections.

BOOKLIS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A grand achievement."

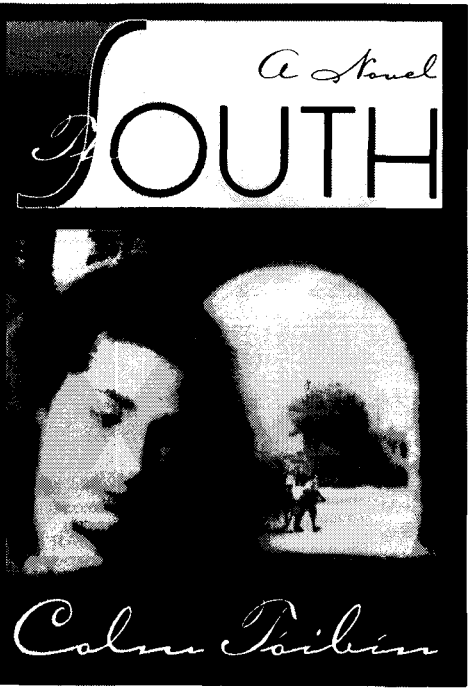
—Don DeLillo

From renowned Irish journalist Colm Tóibín comes a powerful novel of a young Irish woman who abandons family and country to find freedom in Barcelona.

"**A rare delight...**a novel written with grace and intelligence...Tóibín's talent is amazing."

—*Washington Post Book World*

"**A highly impressive debut...**with a haunting emotional resonance." —*Boston Globe*



"***The South* has both a surface and a deeper clarity...**vivid, without a cliche or a wasted word."
—*Los Angeles Times*

"**A book of sustained lyrical beauty and power...**all the more remarkable for its language... pared down to what belongs and nothing else."
—*Chicago Tribune Books*

Winner of the *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Literature Prize for a First Book

At bookstores now **VIKING** Penguin USA

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PETER LANG

New York • Berne • Berlin • Frankfurt/M. • Paris • Wien

A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND
Twenty-two Interviews with Northrop Frye

Edited by Robert D. Denham

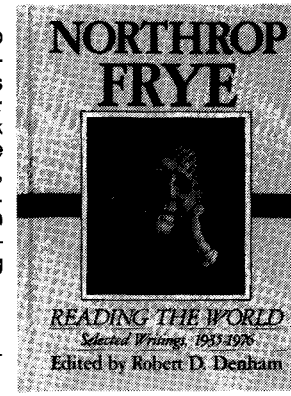
A World in a Grain of Sand is a collection of twenty-two interviews with Northrop Frye from the early 1960s through the 1980s. Frye responds to a wide range of questions about the media, education, religion, literary theory, language, music and literature itself – from Plato and the Bible to Milton, Blake, Shelley, and Melville. Half of the interviews, transcribed from tape recordings, are published here for the first time. Throughout the collection the reader will discover a richly stored mind, often expressing itself in an ironic mode, arguing for the value of both the liberal tradition and the visionary imagination. What emerges finally from the interviews is Frye's own broad vision of the social function of words.

1991 359 pages ISBN 0-8204-1215-5 hardback $ 59.95

READING THE WORLD
Selected Writings, 1935–1976
by Northrop Frye

Edited by Robert D. Denham

Reading the World is a collection of eighty of Northrop Frye's essays, reviews, editorials, sermons, addresses, and other occasional pieces. Half of the selections were originally published in the *Canadian Forum;* twelve are published here for the first time. The book reveals one of the most extraordinary minds of our time engaging a wide range of political, social, artistic, religious, educational, literary, and critical questions. What emerges from the whole is a deeply moral vision rooted in the values of social democracy and an expansive imaginative vision committed to understanding the products of culture.



1990 XVI, 416 pages.
ISBN 0-8204-1214-7 hardback $ 72.–

VISIONARY POETICS
Essays on Northrop Frye's Criticism

Edited by Robert D. Denham and Thomas Willard

This collection contains eight essays on Northrop Frye's work : four examine the contexts of his criticism and four reflect on *Anatomy of Criticism* thirty years after its publication. Each of the essays focuses on an issue decidedly central to the critical vision Frye has developed over his long career. Frye's own contribution, which introduces the collection, foreshadows many of the themes of the other contributors. Written in the year of Frye's seventy-fifth birthday, the papers in this collection seek to recognize his achievement and to consider its place in the world of contemporary critical thought.

1991 161 pages ISBN 0-8204-1216-3 hardback $ 37.95

Please order direct and prepay by check to :

PETER LANG PUBLISHING, INC. – 62 West 45th Street – New York, NY 10036
✆ (212) 302-6740

Enclose $ 3.– for the first and $ 1.50 for each additional book for postage and handling.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review

Publisher	Deborah S. Pease
Editors	George A. Plimpton, Peter Matthiessen, Donald Hall, Robert B. Silvers, Blair Fuller, Maxine Groffsky
Managing Editor	James Linville
Editor-at-Large	Jeanne McCulloch
Associate Editors	Elizabeth Gaffney, Rowan Gaither
Assistant Editors	Charles Rogers, Andrea Chapin
Poetry Editor	Patricia Storace
Art Editor	Richard Marshall
Paris Editor	Harry Mathews
London Editor	Shusha Guppy
Business Manager	Lillian von Nickern
Print Director	Joan Krawczyk
Special Consultants	Robert Phillips, Ben Sonnenberg
Contributing Editors	William Plummer, Patsy Southgate, Lucas Matthiessen, Joanie McDonnell, Charles Russell, David Michaelis, Helen Bartlett, Robert Becker, Joanna Laufer, John Glusman, Gerald Howard, Tom Jenks, Mary Maguire, Michael Sagalyn, Morgan Entrekin, Ileene Smith, Dan Max, Elise Paschen, William Wadsworth, Barbara Jones, Allan Peacock, Molly McQuade, Adam Begley, Christopher Merrill, Haruki Murakami
Editorial Assistants	Rose Styron, Jill Fox, Mary B. Lumet, Kevin Richardson, Matthew Rose, Michele Somerville, Ian Ganassi, Julia Myer, Kip Azzoni, Susannah Hunnewell, Dini von Mueffling, Joanna Hernandez, Claudia Grazioso, Barry Munger, Kendra Taylor, Paul Nastu, Christopher Orr, David Gimbel, Tanuja Desai, Emily Mott, Ken Baron, Timothy Sultan, David Branyan, Walker Gaffney, David Madole, Alexander Shakar, Anja Erdmann, Daniel Kunitz, Ellen Geist, Jonathan Bing, David Patrick, Phyllida Burlingame, Wendy Kagan, Joachim Till, Larissa MacFarquhar, Colin Dickerman, Reid Sherline, Logan Ward, Gia Kourlas
Advisory Editors	Nelson Aldrich, Patrick Bowles, Joan Dillon, William Pène du Bois, Drue Heinz, John Train, Harold L. Humes, Ben Johnson, Jonathan Miller, John Phillips, Thomas H. Guinzburg, Lawrence M. Bensky, Frederick Seidel, Terry Southern, Max Steele, Philip Roth, William Styron, Eugene Walter, Christopher Cerf, Tom Clark, Ron Padgett, Maggie Paley, Fayette Hickox, Molly McKaughan, Francine du Plessix Gray, Lindy Guinness, Hallie Gay Walden, David Robbins, David Evanier, Mona Simpson, Jonathan Galassi, Jonathan Dee, Antonio Weiss, Beth Drenning, Christopher Lightfoot Walker
Consultants	Squaw Valley Community of Writers, Timothy Dickinson
Founding Publisher	Sadruddin Aga Khan
Former Publishers	Bernard F. Conners, Ron Dante

The Paris Review is published quarterly by The Paris Review, Inc. Vol. 33, No. 121, Winter, 1991. Office: 45-39 171 Place, Flushing, New York 11358 (ISSN #0031-2037). Paris Office: Harry Mathews, 67 rue de Grenelle, Paris 75007 France. London Office: Shusha Guppy, 8 Shawfield St., London, SW3. Distributors in the U.S.A.: Eastern News Company, Sandusky, OH. Typeset and printed in USA by Haddon Craftsmen, Bloomsburg, Pa. Price for single issue in USA: $7.00; in France: 40F; in the UK: £4. Post-paid subscription for four issues $24, for eight issues $48, lifetime Associate $1000. Postal surcharge of $7.00 per four issues outside USA (excluding life subscriptions). Subscription card is bound within magazine. Please give six weeks notice of change of address using subscription card. While The Paris Review welcomes the submission of unsolicited manuscripts, it cannot accept responsibility for their loss or delay, or engage in related correspondence. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope. Fiction manuscripts should be submitted to George Plimpton, poetry to Patricia Storace c/o Box S, The Paris Review, 541 East 72nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.
Charter member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses. This publication is made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.
Second Class postage paid at Flushing, New York, and at additional mailing offices.
Postmaster: Please send address changes to 45-39 171st Place, Flushing, N.Y. 11358.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NORTON

Agha Shahid Ali
A NOSTALGIST'S MAP OF AMERICA
Poems
$17.95

Adrienne Rich
AN ATLAS OF THE DIFFICULT WORLD
Poems 1988–1991
$17.95 cloth, $7.95 paper

E. E. Cummings
COMPLETE POEMS, 1904–1962, Revised
Edited by George J. Firmage
$50.00 (A Liveright Book)

Mary Stewart Hammond
OUT OF CANAAN
Poems
$17.95

Linda Pastan
HEROES IN DISGUISE
Poems
$17.95

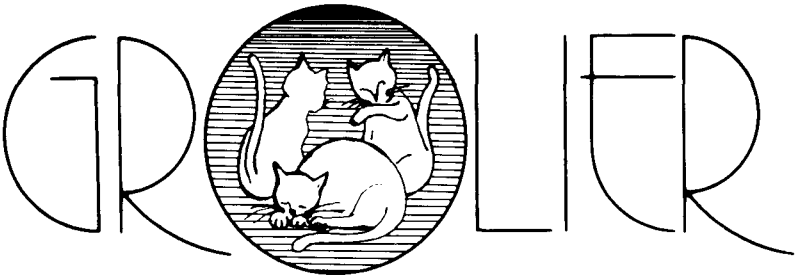
Eavan Boland
OUTSIDE HISTORY
Selected Poems
$17.95 cloth, $9.95 paper

Charlie Smith
INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE DARKNESS
Poems
$17.95 cloth, $9.95 paper

Stephen Dunn
LANDSCAPE AT THE END OF THE CENTURY
Poems
$17.95

W.W. NORTON COMPANY, INC.
500 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10110

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Poetry Book Shop, Inc.

Established in 1927

Trade
•
Small Press
•
Periodicals
•
Audiocassettes

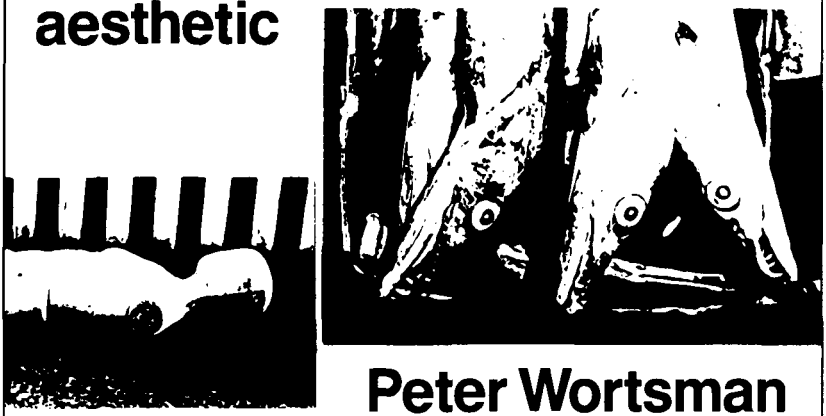
Mail & Special Orders Invited

6 Plympton Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 547-4648
or
(800) 234-POEM
FAX: 547-4230

MC, Visa, Amex accepted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The master of the hit-and-run aesthetic



Peter Wortsman

A Modern Way to Die

SMALL STORIES AND MICROTALES

From the title story, a surreal parable on death as a spectator sport, to *The House of Phantasy,* a voyeuristic glimpse at the psycho-sexual underpinnings of the Third Reich, Peter Wortsman's first collection of short fiction incorporates outrageous reportage and strict imagination, extreme realism and wild fantasy, nightmare parable and black humor—while challenging our preconception of the genre.

"It is about time that others discover that very special Wortsman phenomenon: those 'insolite' stories where humor and humanity are edged with a surrealist and hallucinatory chaos that one is bound to recognize; it finally pays us all a visit at one time or another in our lives."—James Gill, publisher, *2Plus2: A Collection of International Writing*

AT ALL BOOKSTORES

FROMM INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION
Distributed by National Book Network, Lanham, Maryland

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOW IN PERENNIAL

◀ "More lucidity, wit, wisdom, and poetry than is expected from 100 years of novelists, let alone one man."
—William Kennedy,
New York Times Book Review
$10.95 paperback

"Brings ▶ together both García Márquez's early and late styles. The former deserves our respect; the latter requires our celebration."
—Peter S. Prescott,
Newsweek
$11.00 paperback

◀ "Rich and startling in their matter and confident and eloquent in their manner... They are—the word cannot be avoided—magical."
—John Updike, *The New Yorker*
$11.00 paperback

Also available: *In Evil Hour* $9.00 paperback; *The Autumn of the Patriarch* $11.00 paperback

HarperPerennial
A Division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
Also available from HarperCollins*Canada Ltd.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE NATIONAL POETRY SERIES

ANNOUNCING THE 1992 COMPETITION

The National Poetry Series was established in 1978 to recognize and promote excellence in contemporary poetry by ensuring the publication of five books of poetry each year through a series of participating publishers. This year, five distinguished poets will each select one winning manuscript from entries to the Open Competition; winning books will appear in Summer 1993.

◆

Recent Judges: Charles Simic, C.K. Williams, Edward Hirsch, W.S. Merwin, Jorie Graham, Denise Levertov, Sharon Olds, Margaret Atwood, James Merrill, Seamus Heaney, Louise Glück, Carolyn Forché, Robert Hass, and Charles Wright.

Entry Period: January 1 - February 15, 1992.

Entry Requirements: Previously unpublished book-length manuscripts of poetry accompanied by a $15.00 entrance fee. You must be an American citizen to participate. Due to the large volume of submissions received, manuscripts cannot be returned.

◆

FOR A COPY OF THE COMPLETE GUIDELINES, PLEASE SEND A STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE TO:

THE NATIONAL POETRY SERIES
100 WEST BROAD STREET
HOPEWELL, NJ 08525

INCHARDI

Novels by J. Inchardi
$20 each

Lines On The Death Of A Fisherman

Three Jews In A Tub

Dreamship

Yurros

A Paper Toy

Intercurse

Jehovah Mafioso

Saturn Maru

Drek Shlak

Om Budsman

The Execution Of Comrade X

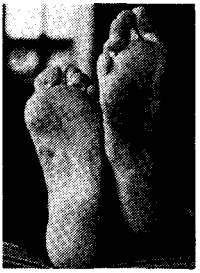
The Resurrection Of Philippe D.

The Ascent Of Maryam

Order from **Sirius Books**
P.O. Box 177
Freeport, Maine 04032

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Prize Winning Illustrated Texts



Harry Mathews
Immeasurable Distances
The Collected Essays

Collected for the first time. Color hardcover edition, Japanese endpapers, with a cut-out photo sheet for creating your own illustrations. 7"x 10", 296 pages.

$35.00
$75.00 *signed limited edition, 100 copies*

Julien Gracq
The Castle of Argol
Translated by Louise Varèse

The ultimate Gothic novel; a literary masterpiece. With a forest panorama printed in color on the cloth binding, and numerous interior plates; two elaborate fold-out plates on translucent papers, and Gothic vignettes throughout. An extraordinary edition, suffused with the landscape of Argol. 7"x 10", 175 pages.

$45.00

August Strindberg
A Witch

The first English translation of this novella — a demonized *Bovary*. Color hardcover, many color plates and a glassine image. Illustrated with photos of Strindberg, his daughter Karin, and his rare landscape paintings -- all embroiled with images of fire. Text printed on gray paper. A first for any text in this format. 7"x 10", 140 pages.

$45.00

The Lapis Press

All prices include sales tax and UPS shipment.

589 No. Venice Blvd., Venice, California 90291

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

American Painters in Giverny

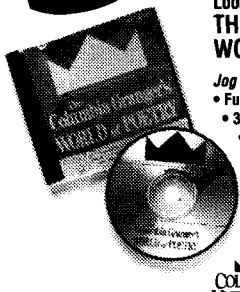
In conjunction with the preparation
of a book on the art colony
in Giverny, France,
Dr. William H. Gerdts
would be interested in receiving
information on the whereabouts of
Giverny paintings
by American and other artists
as well as related documentary
and biographical material.

Please contact: Dr. William H. Gerdts
Room B-03, Graduate Center, C.U.N.Y.
33 West 42nd Street, NY, NY 10036
Fax (212) 427-6775

A novel is a meditation on existence, seen through imaginary characters. The form is unlimited freedom. Throughout its history, the novel has never known how to take advantage of its endless possibilities. It missed its chance.

—MILAN KUNDERA
in **The Paris Review**

STUCK?



Looking for the perfect quote to use in any writing project? Turn to...
THE COLUMBIA GRANGER'S®
WORLD OF POETRY ON CD-ROM

Jog your imagination with:
- **Full text of 8,500 classic poems**
- **3,000 definitive quotations from an additional 1,500 famous poems**
- **4,000 subjects**
- **Search by author, subject, title, first line, or key word**
- **Find the anthology location for any of 70,000 poems by 12,000 poets.**

A cinch to use:
- **90-day free trial**
- **24-hour 800-number for help.**

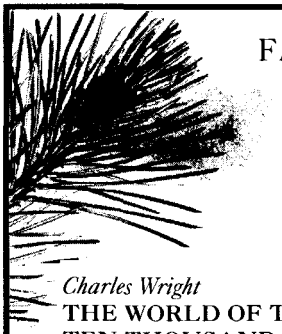
0-231-07672-X / $699.00 net

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Price includes any supplement published within 90 days of shipping date. To order, call or write. Dept. T27 • 136 South Broadway, Irvington, NY 10533 (914) 591-9111

Requires IBM XT, 286, 386 or fully compatible computer; PC/MS-DOS version 3.0 or higher; 640K primary memory (RAM); CD-ROM Drive using Microsoft extensions version 1.0 or higher.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

POETRY

Fall / Winter Poetry Books

Charles Wright
THE WORLD OF THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS
Poems 1980–1990
Paperback / September
0-374-52326-6

Les Murray
THE BOYS WHO STOLE THE FUNERAL
A Novel Sequence
Hardcover / October
0-374-11603-2

Federico García Lorca
THE COLLECTED POEMS
Ed. by Christopher Maurer
Hardcover / November
0-374-12624-0

Christopher Logue
KINGS
An Account of Books 1 and 2 of Homer's *Iliad*
Hardcover / November
0-374-18151-9

Heberto Padilla
A FOUNTAIN, A HOUSE OF STONE
Poems
Trans. by Alastair Reid and Alexander Coleman
Bilingual edition
Hardcover / November
0-374-15781-2

Seamus Heaney
SEEING THINGS
Poems
Hardcover / December
0-374-25776-0

Seamus Heaney
SELECTED POEMS 1966–1987
Paperback / December
0-374-52280-4

Les Murray
THE RABBITER'S BOUNTY
Collected Poems
Hardcover / January
0-374-12622-4

Adam Zagajewski
CANVAS
Trans. by Renata Gorczynski and Benjamin Ivry
Hardcover / January
0-374-11867-1

Ted Hughes
WOLFWATCHING
Paperback / January
0-374-52325-8

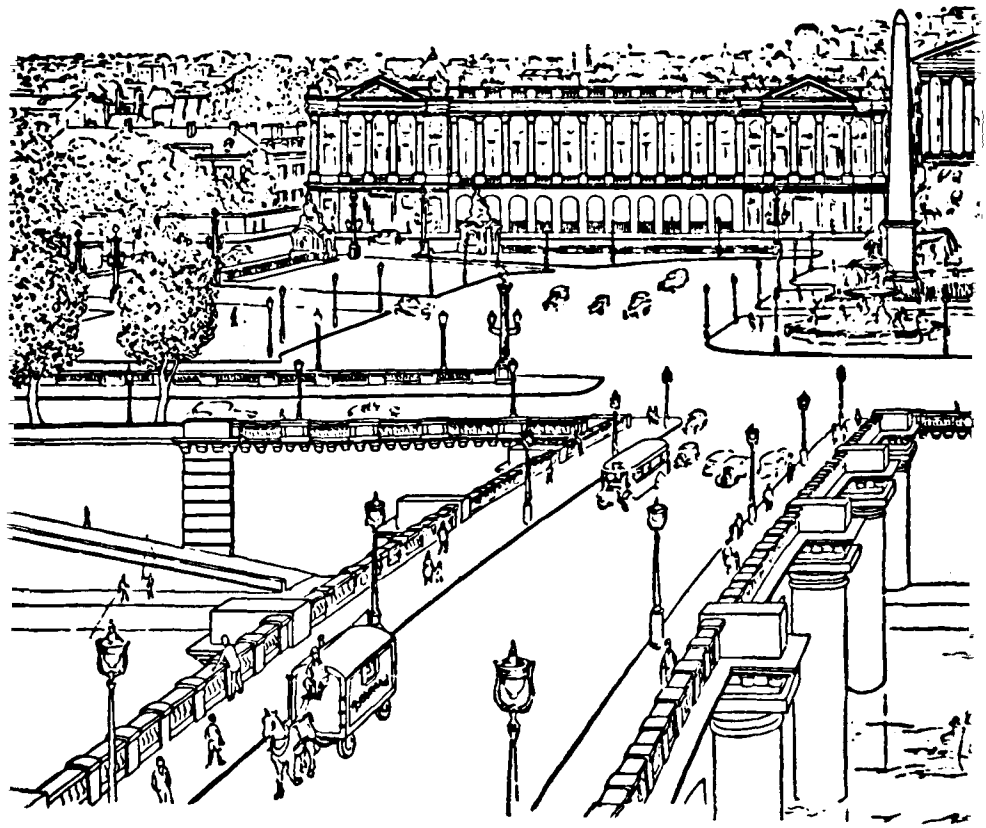
Philip Larkin
COLLECTED POEMS
Hardcover / Back in Print
0-374-12623-2

To receive a current catalog of all our titles, please write:
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
19 Union Square West
New York, N.Y. 10003
or call 212-206-5311

F A R R A R ❄ S T R A U S ❄ G I R O U X
Now at your bookstore, or call 1-800-631-8571

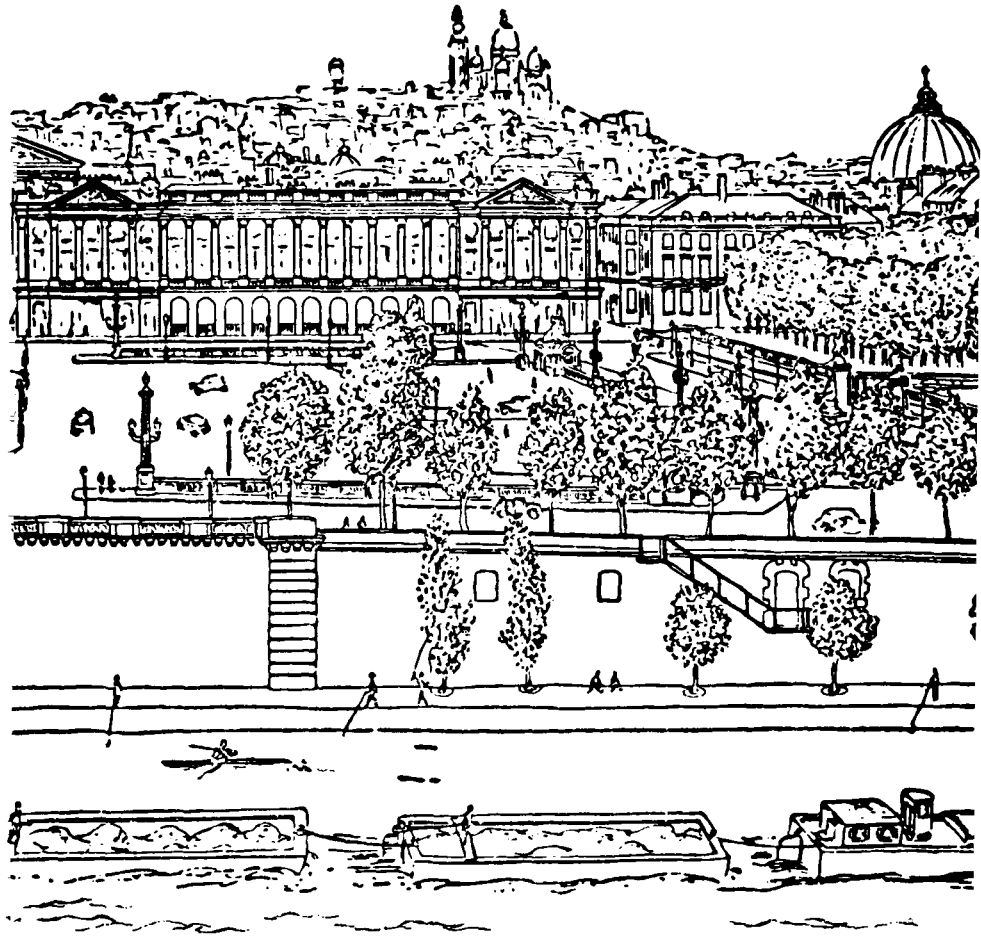
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review



45-39 171 Place
Flushing, New York 11358

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Eastern News Distributors, Inc.
1130 Cleveland Road
Sandusky, Ohio 44870

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Frontispiece by William Pène du Bois.
Cover by Nayland Blake, *A Moral Constellation,* 1991, ink on paper.
Table of Contents illustration by Alexis Smith, *Rocky Road,* 1990, mixed media collage.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Number 121

	Interviews	
Harold Brodkey	*The Art of Fiction CXXVI*	51
Reynolds Price	*The Art of Fiction CXXVII*	151
	Feature	
Donald Hall	*Rocks and Whirlpools: Archibald MacLeish and Yvor Winters*	211
	Fiction	
Bernardine Connelly	*Bait & Switch*	92
Susan Minot	*House of Women*	140
Richard Stern	*Del Plunko Performs*	193
Paul West	*Blind White Fish in Belgium*	16
	Art	
David McDermott and Peter McGough	*Portraits*	109
	Poetry	
Elizabeth Alexander	*Two Poems*	48
Bruce Bawer	*ASPCA*	138
Georgi Belev	*The Forest Comes Down at Night*	119
Christopher Benfey	*Two Poems*	187
April Bernard	*Two Poems*	120
Michael Burkard	*Before the Dark*	180
Martin Edmunds	*Moon*	186
Jim Elledge	*Household Gods*	204
Caroline Finkelstein	*Soup of the Evening*	203
Lucy Grealy	*Ward 10*	124
Zbigniew Herbert	*Four Poems*	37
Daryl Hine	*In Place*	118
Roald Hoffmann	*Two Poems*	190
Andrew Hudgins	*Aunt Mary Jean*	189
William Logan	*Bad Dream*	202
Alan Michael Parker	*Blackbird Villanelle*	192
Anthony Robbins	*Destroyers*	127
Len Roberts	*Learning the Planets*	122
Kuroda Saburo	*Three Poems*	208
Stephen Sandy	*Great Plains Dooryard*	126
Peter Schmitt	*Friends with Numbers*	206
B.A. St. Andrews	*Topography: The Brain Scan*	45
Charles Tomlinson	*Two Poems*	43
Anne Winters	*The First Verse*	133
	Notes on Contributors	248

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Blind White Fish in Belgium

Paul West

I

Sister Binche began her duties in a serious manner, taking extra time to unbandage his eyes, which operation felt to him nothing like a turban, but more like someone slowly twirling his head, tapping little messages through the decreasing layer of muslin and tugging him gently this way and that in a horizontal Saint Vitus's dance that did not end when she had finished; his head went on wobbling in the medium called air that you could never see, blind or not. What are you doing now, he would say, and she would always give him the same answer: all that is good for you, in her glaciated, slow English. He did not see the raised bed she made from lint soaked in antiseptic, setting first one eye and then the other in a little rectangle that allowed for the curvature of his upper cheek. From a tiny watering can she poured boracic solution against the puckered, bloody whites, almost cooing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to him, and it all felt polar cool, the lint, the liquid, her hands, just the thing he had dreamed about in the heat and sludge of the craters and trenches. Each eye took five minutes and she called it irrigation, carefully directing the spout to all areas of the eye, sometimes pouring for a long time and making a flood, sometimes doing just a quick tip to soothe an area neglected. For the moment at peace, Harry felt he was being christened in an unusual way, though the lotion felt astringent, especially in his left eye, the worse hurt. Other days, she did not use the little pouring can at all, but encouraged him to use an eye cup himself, handing it to him full and then helping him to bring it into place with a sudden tip and plunge, always careful not to jam it hard against whatever was beneath it. Then he held the cup in place and tried to blink, finally removing it with a second tip followed by a groping thrust toward her voice. Sometimes he messed up, spilling boracic on his chest, but mostly he got his eye, grateful that the water used in the solution was tepid. At the moment, this sluicing was the thing he wanted most in life, and he got it every three hours. The hospital staff filled him with eggs and crusty bread, made him strong sweet tea that reminded him of the army, from which he considered himself well and truly severed, stroked his head, combed his hair, cleaned his ears and nostrils, and waited for changes. Strong lights came and went unnoticed as he tried to accustom himself to being a baby, much of the time in bed, but also walked in his wheelchair and escorted on short promenades by Sister Binche, whose protégé he had fast become, partly because he reminded her of her brother, captured in the Somme, partly because she felt for the blind, the deaf, the dumb with a special vicarious gift that argued in her a tremendous capacity to discover how it felt to be somebody else. In Harry she discerned something copiously ascetic, perhaps mistaking the bareness of his early life for girding of the loins, self-denial, the beginning of the *via dolorosa.* She treasured him and taught him some words of French,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and after a few weeks they were able to hold private rudimentary conversations about weather, food, the Vickers machine gun, bread dipped in bacon fat, book lovers in his home in Exington, no-man's-land, and the man named Blood found on top of him, shattered and dry. For pain, of which he had a great deal, she gripped his fists and almost wrestled him, also letting him bite the heel of her somewhat roughened hand. Older than he, she saw him at the beginning of a career as one of life's victims: not merely a *mutilé de guerre,* a phrase she had candidly taught him (which he said as *matelot de gair*), unless—she did not give him much chance of seeing again, and she would soon have to inform him of the need to learn Braille. But not yet. It was a month since he had been wounded, and not all the right surgeons had been to prod him yet, although he described himself to her as a goner, a useless blighter. There is still Woodbine, the American, she said, who will be here soon. Let *him* see. Harry wanted the issue final, so that he might evolve an absolute attitude and become one thing or another. Having already told Hilly to forget him, to find a stockbroker or an officer, he regarded that piece of business as transacted, and stopped writing, at least until Sister Binche rebuked him and told him not to be so sadistic (word he did not have). He still did not know her first name, and had not asked it, resolved in some reciprocal maneuver to deny himself things in much the same way as blindness denied him her face, though he had felt at its high cheekbones, the deep compassionate chin, the gray etiolated-looking eyes that sometimes in sunlight seemed not to be there at all, making her eligible for the term *white-eyes* gleaned from the American Indians. She was black haired, she told him, and therefore rather Irish-looking, he thought, with that combination of light and dark, and therefore fair complected too with freckles along her arms but none on her chest. Ari, she called him, or Sergeant Ari, making him feel important and imposing. The double eye patch made him look like a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man going out to a firing squad, and she tried to bandage his head down low, screening the eyes just enough, but giving them air, a touch of breeze or her own mouth gently blowing at him to get his attention. She had removed much of the crust from the roots of his lashes and increased with minor coaxing their natural flexure away from the surface of the eye. If this attention soothed him, he never said, accepting it as the due of a blinded man who wondered how terrible he looked.

"Am I a monster?" he asked, hoping never to hear the answer, the white lie.

"Only in your mind, Ari," he heard. "Before you label someone a monster, you must consult his soul, and, if that is in good working order like a chiming clock, then you say the clock is wonderful, like a polar bear in bedroom slippers." Sometimes she went off like that, clinching all with an image that crackled like a firework even while seeming to go off the point. She stroked his arms, his shoulders, tugged on his ears and his toes, and, one night when everyone else was asleep and he was groaning with tiny penetrant pain, she slid her hands beneath the sheets and opened his hospital pajama trousers, exposing himself to himself, hand-galloping the virgin he hardly knew he was, and the headache went away, as well as his memory of what he had considered the happiness of his previous life. "There," she said, "now we've been introduced. You have a beautiful build. I am going to visit you again, Ari, and show you what to do." He knew, but he had hardly had time. His seductions had been toward death, and only young men at that. His orgasms had been those of panic and terror, when the rear end puckered and retched. His only sadness afterward had been his distance from the animating premise of the war: why was it being fought? Fabienne, he said; it doesn't sound like a woman's name at all. At least (he told her), it won't matter if I get any of it in my eye will it? Where it's going, she reassured him in her slowest French, it won't have any chance to get into an eye, *mon trésor.* He was not, he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew, being unfaithful to Hilly because none of this figured in his relationship with her, and probably never would. One day he would tell her about it, much as if confessing a trip to the dentist. Well, perhaps not quite that, but like gambling, shooting pigeons, letting a greased pig loose in a sedate club for foot soldiers. It seemed a great pity to him that this experience in the loins had come to him too late, now that he was a dead man; wouldn't it have been better to have something to compare it with, such as making love with his eyes on the beloved instead of trying to make a difference between dark and dark, between bandage dark and sunshine dark, aghast that, there in the bed as he shoved and stabbed against her, his eyes had only the pawnbroked glory of two bullet holes or, as he invoked one of the oldest soldierly curses, two piss holes in the snow? Better they should bandage his penis to his leg and wait for it to wither, fall off, like the feet of Chinese children. It was no use going home a sexual success but a flop at seeing. Nor was it much use staying here, being felt sorry for by a woman he had never seen. I, he told himself, am only an invitation to blindness; living with me, or even bedding down in the ward in the small hours, is like asking someone else to be blind too. What he had entered was a newly opened wound that she thought was only her normal organ, whereas he had maimed it, set it in a different category altogether, among the sponges, the roots, the fungi, the cuckoo spits. She thought she was still herself, refusing to tell him how many men she had handled, how many had entered her, little knowing that the angel of death had lain with her and irrevocably joined her to the league of the helpless. He was wrong, but his powers of analysis did not take him to the point at which he might realize how she worked: by means of sentimental convection, which meant moving huge areas of feeling around within her, never losing them but frequently combining them in new ways, linking a newly discovered Patagonia (Harry, Ari) to a Latin America

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

already within her possession. *She* lived by comparison, by agglutinating man to man, after a few years without ever thinking herself a nymphomaniac or even promiscuous, creating a piebald lover, a Joseph's coat of satisfactions. Her memory belonged to her much as, sometimes, she belonged to several men in the same phase, or even in the same evening if she could manage it. She was open, she decided, and she should be filled. One day, Ari would be sent to a hospital in London, to be put through further ordeals, and that would be that. If she had unhinged him somewhat, she had no idea of it, choosing rather to think of herself as the angel of satiety, as capable of kissing and licking blind men's eye sockets as their genitals, once you became accustomed, she mused, to the local texture, the topography, the patchwork aromas and the rest. Having risen high in her profession, not least on account of an imperious contralto voice and a way of cowing doctors by raising herself to her full six feet in height, she had become accustomed to the often-vaunted embarrassments of having a body; the soul was a greater obstacle by far, and she wanted to settle herself in the flesh, as it were, to come to terms with all the organedness there was, presuming distantly that, when the Almighty first formed the flesh, He did it out of boredom with abstract ideas. He made the dirty bits to drive his masterpieces crazy.

Amazed he had survived the war while knowing so little of life, Harry caught himself in the middle of the thought and wondered if indeed he had survived. Being alive was one thing, but being alive blind was like being made of gun cotton: one touch and you went sky-high. That just about summed up his days and nights with Fabienne Binche. Diligently she piped chemicals into his eyes while he wished them ever cooler, but she taught him hygiene in other ways too, coming to him, after the lights were dimmed, with a basin of hot water and a rather coarse-feeling facecloth with which she laved his glans after gently peeling the foreskin back. Until only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

days ago, Harry had not realized the skin retracted, and he now, perhaps alas, linked erection with the act of washing; you never did it when you were soft. Back he lay, humming something Latin from the Gregorians, while Fabienne Binche worked upon his privates the office of the portable bidet, astounding him with a flick or a finger snap as if she were supervising a frisky kitten and delighting him later in the performance with cold cream and eau de cologne until he felt wholly spruced up, for either the fray or a good night's sleep, depending on her mood and her hours. It might have been paradise save for his eyes; he certainly felt ministered to, delighted to have the bulb of his organ aired in this foreign place, sometimes trying to figure out how far this new life of his, in which ecstasy and pain combined equally, was from the old one, in which he had neither. If this was France, or Belgium, he wanted to stay here for ever, blind or not, and he seriously tried to keep his mind from next month or next year. Aladdin in his own cave, he now knew that Aladdin's cave had opened because somebody like Fabienne Binche had greased the hinges of its door with sesame oil. Sometimes he thought he was flying, the wings of an old biplane between his teeth, the rigging all screams; sometimes he thought he was underground in one of those tunnels dug under the front, while detonations went on incessantly above them. His conversations with Fabienne were much the same, day in, day out.

"Who is he," she murmured. "He's an ugly young soldier full of love." Then she sang, with buoyant nasality: "Will he always be blind? Will he never see the beauties who attend him?"

To which Harry said nothing, but hummed voluptuous contentment, little realizing how much a novelty—and little else—he was in her complex and erotic life. Because he could not see, she read aloud to him the properties of his body, the sexual part, anyway, from the little steamy fizz she milked from him in the beginning to the splatter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of hot gruel she fostered in him after a week or so, exclaiming in delight as it popped upward in the half-light of the ward; as if an old clay pipe had given up all its saliva in one go. She taught him names; said his body was an aviary of flightless parakeets, each wrapped in fragrant Armenian paper. She taught him how his tongue and hands might do duty for his benighted eyes, and how his sharp military nose had lain in abeyance for too long.

Harry began to think of himself as lucky, master-navigator and master-cocksman in one, at last come into his own, severed from the prosaic saunter of engagement and marriage so as to become the roué of the ward, a man who almost missed his disgraceful vocation, now fit to be greeted by the male nurse on his morning rounds with hot chocolate: "Good morning, English bums, good morning American bums, *shokolah, shokolah.*" Where had he learned such twaddle? Harry wondered about the other patients and tried to estimate how many of them Fabienne had likewise sacrificed to her own imperious mucous membranes. He didn't care if he was the only one or one in twelve; he just knew that he never again wanted to be without this oozing extreme of life that gave the lie to war, blindness, disappointment, lack of hope, loneliness—everything. In a way she was too old for all of them in there, but in another she was the perfect tutor in lubricity, lustful friendliness. She loved what she smelled while tasting. She loved what she tasted while smelling. She loved what she smelled and tasted while touching and listening. She was a waning phantom, already beginning to suffer from varicosity behind her knees, little bouts in which her ankles went sideways, and, she was sure, prey to sudden extra heartbeats that slightly winded her. Well, she was going down in flames, willing to waste nothing so long as she had it.

Here she came, slightly breathless from being big and having to move neatly through the hushed-down ward. Harry felt a little bird heave upward from his chest, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all things begin to twitch and stiffen. Her very approach, in rubber-soled slippers, was aphrodisiac; but Harry, a poor sleeper, was the only one regularly awake, with his organ in his hand, his other hand behind his head, smoothing to a hypnotic and callow rhythm. Here she came, the vestal of the hot-water bottle and the lavender soap, willing to tease him by threatening his penis with a scrubbing brush ("Feel at this, *mon grand*"), but ever disposed to baby him and bring him to climax in the same breath, both cooing and urging to get him ready for a public appearance with his prowess in his pants to begin with and then lofted high in front of the other blind men who to a man cupped their ears for sounds of friction, imminence, bliss and decrescendo. Noncommissioned officers, she found, were reluctant to lie back and be serviced, where everyone from lieutenant upward seemed only too happy not to exert himself, not while the night prowler toiled. It was the strangest orgy she had ever known: muted and impeded. Now she knew what the thought of death, hemorrhage, or amputation, did to the standing penis, making it into a fugitive conical toffee busily scurrying for cover in its root. She was as accustomed to last rites as to first spendings, preferring, with the one, to weep later in her little garret atop the hospital, with the other, to let the seepages dry and flake away, as having had a brief tumultuous dignity in the arena of the wounded man's groin. Life was like that, she thought, as she nodded a far from premature yes. Life spilled, out or over. To die was to go. To come was to die. Those who had never come much were never at ease with death.

II

One warm sunny Sunday, Fabienne Binche and several other nurses took the ambulant blind on a little outing, the first of many planned, although some of the doctors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the Red Cross Hospital had argued that those who could not walk would feel resentful. In the end, however, it had been decided to send the first group and see what happened. Off they went in two ambulances and, within the hour, were lining up at the entrance, marching a few steps forward (some, still military, got it right; Harry shuffled, to show his exclusion from the war). He reached, he found something bulbous and concrete: the arm of a mighty statue that blocked his path while, elsewhere in the echoing gallery, other blindfolded men in blue tunics hesitantly made contact with pieces of marble and stone, wondering what they were feeling. The public were never allowed to touch, but this was a special occasion: not a guessing game, though it degenerated into one as the men slowly came to life and a long-lost ribaldry lifted its tactless head. Those listening pretended not to hear what the men whispered, announced, and shouted: "Goliath's balls, to be sure!" "Jack the Beanstalk's stalk, lads!" "My old woman's backside, frozen stiff." It was perhaps the first serious laugh they had had since entering the hospital. Harry enjoyed the coolness of the various minerals, responding to the muggy weather without the gusto of the others, and wondering if this laying-on of hands would extend to human bodies as well. Or were they all, the blind ones, already so sated with Sister Binche as not to care? He asked, was told that only she, of all the nurses, made the midnight rounds, and not with everybody either. She played favorites, and had been known to overpower a given soldier for a week, then leave him alone altogether, to wonder what he had done wrong. Nobody else, it seemed, had come in for as many attentions as Harry, for whom she had developed a soft spot banned in the daytime, but allowed to pulse and bulge as soon as the sun had set.

Alas for art and the therapeutic visit, several of the livelier young soldiers had opened their flies and were attempting lewd overtures to what they presumed were appropriate places of the statues in front of them; only a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Turkish bath was missing as they pushed and clasped, yelling obscenities about the white cliffs of Dover, blindness from self-abuse, hollow spines from tossing-off, and the big shots of their schooldays who kept enormous stone jars of sperm under their beds, the tribal law being that you must never let any of it get away from you. It had not taken long for the blinded men to revert to adolescent atavism, to fast impromptu exchanges about swishers and danglers, knackers and bollocks, jamrags and horse collars, all of it diffident and amateurish, just the sort of thing they said in the trenches, not to hymn desire but to vent their nerves. Here they had ample reason to open up, quite ignoring the humanitarian motives of Sister Binche's nurses. For a while Harry, more conversant with the peculiar turns of Fabienne Binche's mind, thought there would be naked human beings, women certainly, in between the statues, awaiting only a soldier's touch to erupt into lascivious life. Then he thought that he and his mates were supposed to strip naked, except for their head bandages, and go through the motions that several had attempted—not that he knew—while more or less clad.

In the end he decided this was one of those cultural expeditions he had heard about. Music would be next, followed by a visit to the herbal spice gardens. It was all a way of killing time until the doctors could think of something to do, until each man's future was a certainty. This was a brothel of stone, he decided: if a man's desire was hot enough, the statues would melt, being of wax. He suddenly longed for a Vickers machine gun to lay waste the humanity surrounding him: nurses and soldiers and all. He did not want to see, hear, or any of the rest of it. They had been brought out of the hospital like lunatics from a mental institution, made to look silly and conspicuous, being aired like dogs on an aristocratic whim by people who should know better.

Harry's ruddy skin was pale for all the summer's heat. His hair rose high from the inner perimeter of the band-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ages and had that slept-on look. His gait had become unsteady; he walked with an invisible tureen of hot liquid balanced on his crown. For all their vulgarities, the blind soldiers conducted themselves with hesitant delicacy, every now and then, among the solid stances of the statues, grooming themselves with one finger raised to the cheek, testing that area for scars or scabs, then another finger or the same (but only ever one) tapping the concavity between chin and bottom lip. They believed that the eyes, once mauled, led the rest of the face downward to extinction too, and they were not going to be thus consecutively wounded without knowing about it. An ark of whirling knives surrounded them. They breathed shrapnel as tiny as grains of sand. Their lips dried so much they made a glow and sometimes caught fire. Blocked with drainage, their nostrils soon clogged up on any outing, and the return journey became mainly a matter of blowing into khaki handkerchiefs, which they then folded back up into the rectangular creases left by the smoothing iron, in effect sticking the little panels together with thumb-flattened blots of blood, which stuck better than anything: one of its main duties, Harry thought. Blood is God's glue. God's in his heaven. All's right with the world. Human skin is blood's best blotter. All nice outings come to an end. I have to keep up my strength for tonight. Odd, you'd think people would find us disgusting, but for some it just sharpens the edge of novelty. They could pull all kinds of faces and we'd never see a thing. They could rent us out to the most twisted sinners in Creation, so many francs a go, and extra to lift up the corner of the bandage and have a peek into the twin glory holes, nothing of the eyes left but two cooked raisins.

On their return, all the men had their eyes bathed. In case we saw anything, Harry thought, they are washing it away. Off. They don't want us to go getting fancy ideas about having a good look at things. Good *shufti,* as the Arabs say. I must say, I don't like having to deal with things on hearsay. Nobody could tell him what Sister

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Binche looked like. No nurse would. Could she, just perhaps, be blind herself, not a nurse or a sister, but an over-eager blind volunteer for whom night rounds were as natural as graveyards for the dead.

Slowly he was learning to reassemble his body, which meant that his eye wound had unsettled everything else, creating new relationships, new tensions, new alliances. He would never have believed it, but after an hour or two of being put on anew the bandage felt heavy, sagging and cumbersome, pulling his eyebrows down toward his cheeks. As a result, he was constantly shoving it upward, from an imagined droop; up and up it went until the eye sockets came into view and the clandestine light that he no longer revelled in slid over the hurt part of his face, over a barren moon, and the eyes in their nacelles did nothing for him at all. The nurses were always tugging their charges' bandages back into place, wondering if any of them would see again or if this was how it was going to be when they reached twenty and ever thereafter. Harry sensed he was lighter, less bulky, and decided that food you could not see did not nourish you. Nowadays, when he had speared the morsel, he brought his fork close to his nose and inhaled like someone drilled; the aroma was always better than the taste, but that was no doubt because he was accustomed to army fare and this was French food, the best cuisine in the world, at least for those brought up on it. He missed his bread and bacon dip, the bully beef, the mud-encrusted bread, the metallic-tasting tea. Here he got coffee, eggs and ham, soufflés and baguettes: delicious, but in a profound sense alienating: food for a toff, he thought. There was something else wrong with it, he thought; it was peacetime food, and, unless the war had suddenly ended (he envisioned a separate peace signed by France and Belgium while the British went on fighting), inappropriate, as if life was going on as usual while the cream of manhood was mashing itself into fertilizer not twenty miles away. He had thought of refusing such food, and of encouraging his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fellow wounded to do likewise; but, what the hell, he thought, we might as well tuck in while we can. No telling when, in the dead of night, with our nightshirts flapping around our rear ends, we'll have to get out of here westward on the run, and only the blind ones know the way.

Behind screens there had been a blinded nurse: a critical demonstration of war's futility. Harry had asked to be led in to her, had spoken and touched her hand, then placed a kiss on her arm, all without so much as a sigh from the Belgian nurse, who had other head wounds too. Today she was not there, Fabienne told him: died during the night without so much as a murmur. A soldier was already in the bed. Harry was still waiting for the American doctor to brave the Atlantic and see him; but Harry was impatient for everything, even for Fabienne to leave—he thought that, so long as she treated him specially, he had not even begun to recover, firm in his conviction that he merited nothing out of the ordinary.

III

One morning, Fabienne Binche seemed in a hurry and her habitually seductive voice, in which matronly languor competed with lascivious bustle, had an edge of pure officiousness. Dr. Woodbine was coming to see Harry and give an opinion, so first they wanted Harry awake and then Harry anesthetized. It would take all day, or so Harry surmised, sniffing as he had learned to, first the noble American at loin level, and discovering from the muted whiff of smegma that Woodbine went uncircumcized in the world and was none too punctilious about washing himself. I'm like a bloody dog, Harry thought. They always come and sniff at you right there. Then he was all shudders and tremors, with the pain slicing clean through his head. The area around his eyes felt like hot soot. His nose oozed blood all the time. His

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

face was being tugged by a puppeteer far away, the lines connected by fishhooks. When it eased, Harry began to recollect the velvet seat of Hilly's music stool, with its lovely fume of lemon furniture polish and combusted groin sweat: not Hilly's only, but of players and crooners and examiners since 1800, all those innocent, unfragrant bottoms sitting it out. Ten minutes after Harry passed out and Dr. Woodbine began in earnest, removing more and more tiny shrapnel, a dapper colonel entered the ward and, with permission from Fabienne Binche, left a decoration in a packet on each man's bed, bestowing on each bandage a kiss before moving on. There was no speech, no music, no fuss. The colonel might have been delivering mail or an advertisement for imported pineapple.

What was this decoration? Awarded to officers for gallantry and to noncommissioned officers for professional services, it was the Belgian Order of Leopold I, with swords: plum ribbon, brown metal swords and crown, green leaves upon which sat a white enamel cross and the legend *"L'Union Fait La Force."* Rather than depending from the ribbon, the award was pinned to it. Harry missed his kiss, but his eyes, like those of the other seven NCOs in the ward, had been decorated, and in fine fashion. No one ever queried the Belgian colonel's bona fides, or the fact that he was wearing this same decoration himself. A true Proteus of war, he slipped in and out of uniforms, from one front line to the other, from headquarters to headquarters, taking note with fastidious aversion and, periodically, collecting notes from such of his agents as Sister Fabienne Binche, to whom wounded soldiers talked impetuously.

Beckoned on, Harry allowed his mind to move toward the target of seeing, a literal target with bull, inner, outer, magpie, except that it was no longer one of seeing but of exorbitant pain, almost peaceful in the center but agonizing at the outskirts with a whole spectrum of sensation from tingling and prickling to hot needle and acid

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drop by drop. Dr. Woodbine had finished, but the legacy of his ministrations went on, converting Harry from casual hedonist to convulsing victim as the anesthetic wore off, and he began clutching, rubbing, trying to thumb both eyes into submission. Woodbine had removed as much shrapnel as he could, and he had also scraped the insides of the lids. Harry wanted to be unconscious again as soon as possible, but no oblivion came to quell the caustic star shells that dominated his vision. Fabienne Binche came and went, almost inured, but feeling dried and pointless, giving him what relief she could while Harry prayed for green water, cold, for warm vinegar, for ice, for raw steak, for a hard ball striking his eye hard enough to knock it out: a hundred-mile-an-hour ball with sharp stitching to slice the eyelids. After the routine euphemism, Harry had relaxed and lain back, believing in the words offered him: discomfort, some pressure, a bit of a push shoving gently against the curvature of each eyeball, then describing slow circles until the rhythm and the rotary slow motion had lulled him almost into a trance that could never have been his until years after. No one was better than Dr. Woodbine, that huge man with snowdrift hair growing in and from his ears, breath that smelled like cinnamon, loins that—or so Harry thought—needed a scald in a bidet. Never mind, the man had come 3,456 miles, as he put it: no, farther, because he had come to Belgium, beyond Southampton, scheduled for an operation each day. The ward soon filled with writhing, gasping, hissing surgical successes who created, new every morning, an indecorous moan as background for everything else, such as food spilled or thrown, glasses smashed, sheets torn off the bed and thrown vainly across the new head bandages as if to smother what was blazing underneath.

Each would have fainted, had he been alone there, but none of the blinded soldiers did, each unwilling to put on a bad show in front of the others, who could only hear anyway. Dr. Woodbine sapped them of lechery all right,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but ate enormous meals both before and after he operated, devouring fried potatoes and thick grilled ham. From Baltimore, he must have had problems of his own, gastric and cardiac, but he never mentioned them and continued to operate like a dancer, nimble on his feet, sucking in his paunch the instant he approached the patient's head.

Their Belgian decorations hung from the foot of the beds, cream-daubed mistletoe freshly sprouted, and Fabienne made much of them, explaining this or that facet; but no one took much notice, certainly not those in recovery, not even those awaiting Woodbine, who took the trouble to come in and view the decorated beds himself, saying it was swell, all swell. The upshot, she gathered, was that the blinded men weren't Belgians, did not think of themselves as Belgians, were unhappy to be taken for Belgium's allies, did not wish to be in Belgium and couldn't find it on the map. When the dapper colonel returned, complete with ambulance, Sister Fabienne Binche of the erotically adroit hands and the ever-wet zone would take her leave and drive away eastward, her job well done, a Florence Nightingale in wolf's clothing, all hearts broken behind her, and many male virgins converted to what some of them called the old knee-trembler. She considered going off with a souvenir of each man, a hair here, a splash there, but dismissed the idea as coy; she would content herself with a kiss, and collect up the medals before departing—her colonel liked to economize, and his job was far from done.

Except for this. As a nurse genuinely impressed by Woodbine and his Baltimore ways, she handed him a Belgian medal out of something approaching reverence; he took it, but promptly put it back on Harry's bed after she had gone, the purpose of her departure being ostensibly to pick up medical supplies. The other medals went away with her, fireflies of valor, to be temporarily bestowed elsewhere, say a hundred miles farther on. As Woodbine told it, Harry became confused:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Gave me ya medal, son, she did. These nurses. You got it back. Here, feel."

"What medal?" Harry asked, his mind for some reason on the name of his regiment: the Sherwood Foresters. "Did you say the Binche has gone?"

"She'll be back. You got your medal right here now at the foot of the bed. Funny dame: she took all the others, maybe to get them polished. You got the first one back, I guess. These Belgians, they sure ain't French."

Harry was dreaming of Hilly playing tennis in a wide-brimmed gray hat, from which a mauve bird lifted off, aghast, each time she struck the ball. Harry and Hilly would go for walks again together, newly taken with each other. The ball in the dream was a disk of light from America by sea, a gift from the westering sun of San Francisco, a flash from the heart of things where all medals melted, all bandages came off.

IV

Astounded by the needle's point that fast became a hole made by a knitting needle, then by an awl, Harry felt generous toward the source of light for not having gone away. Painful as it was to do it, he squinted and squinted, half expecting darkness to win out, but nothing went wrong, although the creatures he saw undulated and sagged, billowing and feebly signaling. These were the people who had been alongside him all the time, watching him watch nothing. Where was Fabienne Binche, then? A total apparition? They told him she had been seconded, which sounded vaguely obscene, but it meant she had been sent elsewhere, nobody was quite sure. So he had never seen her, and was unlikely to do so, forever haunted by a lubricious phantom of the everlasting night. But seeing again, never mind how mottled and unsteady a world, dulled the ache; it was as if he had been given the world back again, and he knew that the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

most craven and craving depravities took place in the dark when heart lost hope and body shed its pride. He saw a world little changed, except for Dr. Woodbine's pink cheeks and his huge hands, which had been as intimate with Harry's eyes and their tender sockets as Binche had been with his genitals. Had he grown up? Who was he to formulate such a question? Looking at his face in the steel shaving mirror, he saw the same young, questing Turk, serious but even tempered, more Scottish than Irish, he thought, having a darker tinge, a steadier gaze, a promise of something stern. It was his father's face minus the waxed mustache and the sharp points it tapered into. Harry's own mustache, shaved away by the nurses, had been a sergeant's mustache, allowed luxuriance to age a boy: that was all, and he was glad to see it gone as he no longer had men to command, no Vickers, no revolver, no maps, no bully beef. He was a convalescent, that was all, but he had had an extraordinary blindness, led into riot by an invisible siren whom he might just have invented.

When he opened the package, however, he knew she had been real, for there, stitched elegantly above the famous right-angled Angel of Albert, manhandled into plunging position lest the Germans use the top of her erect head for observation purposes, sat his name: Sergeant Ari Moxon, in red on pale blue, with the dates of his hospitalization: no message, no endearment, but the angel and her tower in full glorious thread. It was something to treasure, and perhaps something to hate. Each corner formed a half-cross as the two rims of the frame continued about three inches outward, having intersected. Had it been rolled up, as for a cardboard tube, certificate-style, Harry might have squirreled it away under his pillow, or into his kit bag (was it here? no, but kit bags were easy to come by). Done up in a frame, however, it was a public object clamoring for a nail to hang on, so as to announce itself and the feelings it embodied. A nurse had already hung it, and now, after

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

showing him, she set it back for him to admire with his newfound eye, which of course meant he had little idea of how far away it was, and that matched his sense of Fabienne Binche, whom he now loathed for being gone, for not being there to watch him take the sampler's measure and delight in its contrasted threads. Couldn't she have waited? Just a day or two? There was something sneaky about her disappearance, as about the Belgian decoration presented him by the man who spirited his bedmate away. A man with a monocle, obsessed with handing out medals? He could hardly believe it.

He needed to know all about her life, more, actually, than he needed her to make love with, as if she had now discharged her assignment and, becoming more of herself because no longer committed to someone else, more worth knowing—ogling, following, eavesdropping upon. Because she had had relations with other men in the ward, he desired her all the more, but his desire for knowledge was greater than that for her buxom, fluent parts. With his hesitant new eye he wanted to interrogate her, watch her doing all the abominable things she did without him, tasting and fondling other men as if she had no primary sweetheart stuck there in the nest of his blindness. But they were all blind, he told himself, except for Bicester pronounced "Bister," who also had come back from the ravine of blindfold misery. When had she blown out the candle? When removed her underwear? When untrussed her six-footer's breasts? Had she come to him without makeup? How had her face been at moments of acutest pleasure, taking or receiving? What had she been? They showed him her photo, culled from the files, and she was hardly as he had imagined: harelipped, drab as a clock, visibly mustached. Still, why no letter? Why just a sampler, mute as a blind man? That afternoon he took the first of several sedatives for excitement brought on, most supposed, by seeing again. His semijubilant presence upset the other soldiers, so he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moved to a smaller ward, of seeing men who had lost limbs and had a whole series of quite different complaints, none of which he heard. He wanted to see the past, the gone, the irrecoverable, and back he would lunge into the prickly oblivion he had thought would never be his again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Four Poems by Zbigniew Herbert

Ordinariness of the Soul

In the morning mice scamper
over the head
over the floor of the head
shreds of conversations
scraps of a poem
the room's muse
enters
in a blue apron
sweeps

such important guests
visit my master
well Heraclitus the Ephesian for example
or the prophet Isaiah

today no one rings

the master paces about impatiently
talks to himself
tears up innocent papers

in the evening goes out in an unknown direction

the muse unties her blue apron
rests her elbows on the window sill
leans out
waits
for her sergeant
with the red mustaches

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hakeldama

The priests have a problem
on the borderline of ethics and accounting

what to do with the silver coins
Judas threw at their feet

the sum was registered
under the heading of expenses
chroniclers will write it down
under the heading of legend

to record it under the rubric
unexpected earnings would be wrong
to put it in the treasury dangerous
it might infect the silver

it wouldn't be right
to buy a candle holder with it for the temple
or give it to the poor

after long consultation
they decide to buy a potter's field
and build a cemetery
for pilgrims

to give—so to speak
money for death
back to death

the solution
was tactful
therefore why

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

does the name of this place
rend the air for centuries
Hakeldama
Hakeldama
field of blood

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meditations of Mr. Cogito on Redemption

He should not have sent his son

too many have seen
his son's pierced hands
his ordinary skin

    it was written
    to reconcile us
    by the worst reconciliation

too many nostrils
have breathed with delight
the odor of his fear

    one should not descend
    low
    fraternize with blood

he should not have sent his son
it was better to reign
in a baroque palace made out of marble clouds
on a throne of terror
with a scepter of death

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Cogito and Pop

I

During a pop concert
Mr. Cogito reflects
on the aesthetics of noise

an idea in itself quite
attractive

to be a god
means to hurl thunderbolts

or less theologically
to swallow the tongue of the elements

to replace Homer
with an earthquake
Horace
with a stone avalanche

to drag from the entrails
what is in the entrails
fright and hunger

to strip the path
of the gut
strip the path
of breathing
to bare the path
of desire

to play on the red throat
frantic love songs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

II

the difficulty is
that the shriek eludes form
is poorer than the voice
which ascends
and falls

the shriek touches silence
but through hoarseness
not through the will
to describe silence

it is garishly dark
from powerlessness of articulation

has rejected the grace of humor
as it knows no half-tones

is like a blade
driven into mystery
but doesn't entwine
around the mystery
doesn't come to know its shapes

it expresses the truth of feelings
from preserves of nature

searches for a lost paradise
in new jungles of order

prays for a violent death
and this will be granted

—translated from the Polish
by John and Bogdana Carpenter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Charles Tomlinson

The Stair

The limbs of the giant spruce that leans
So close to the house, have formed
A kind of stair, a walkway
Up to the summit. The squirrel that lives here
Scorns to descend it step by step,
But with an insane bravado runs
To a branch end, then drops
Accurately off and, six flights down,
Arrives upright, pinecone in hand,
To remain there, tear at and eat it:
Perfectly secure, he is perfectly sane.
Today, comes snow. We should accept
The long-standing invitation
To climb those now carpeted treads,
But snow and common sense say no—
Such analogues are not to be acted on.
And yet we inhabit our images: squirrel
Can even seem a god of heights,
The tree his spruce fane. The animal
Is asleep, and if he were not, he would be
Unconscious of the place devised which we
Take into our minds and so ascend
The real by way of the imaginary tree:
Both lean to the house together,
And, even without their deity, can teach
These wooden walls that this house is a tree house:
We live in a place always just out of reach.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Broom:
The New Wife's Tale

I listened hard. I do not believe in ghosts.
  The house was changing. Indeed, I never saw
Such thorough renovation. "You do not know,"
  She said, "how many ghosts there were
Needed to be laid. The dead
  Don't bury their dead: only the living
Can do that for them—they go on breeding.
  In room after room she multiplied herself
And lay in wait. For him, not me.
  Yet one bright day I entered my own kitchen,
Or almost did—inside the door
  The sight of a broom scratched to and fro.
It was the sound—dry, rasping
  Across the quarries, first made me see it,
Stopped me. It was familiar enough, a stark
  Discordant blue I'd never cared for.
I hurried through expecting the cleaning woman.
  Nobody there, of course . . . It was things
She seemed to cling to—a clock, a chair,
  Now this (it was she had bought it)
Left leaning against the wall, but then I saw—
  Whatever it was she'd meant by it—that I
Must sweep the place clean
  Of all she was reliving or imagining." Determination
Flawed lines in her young face. I do not believe
  In ghosts, except for the one she saw almost.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

B.A. St. Andrews

Topography:
The Brain Scan

After you've become a human drum
to let high frequency thrumming
create magnetic pictures of your

brain, you examine the evidence,
cut by lateral cut, frame by
polarized frame: full frontal

nudity at its most arousing. Shot
one: your skull is Saturn, its
outer ring luminous, the next

dark, oceanic, shifting: you can
nearly hear finely ground shells
and sand scuffing against your

porcelain land. Another layer
of snow-white light rings black
bone, making an anatomical map

of your headlands, your beaches,
the most interior reaches of your
secret home. Your brain is this

island in a sea of bone. Slice
by slice the territory is charted.
Your fontanel, the "soft spot,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the last baby bone to close, spills
its secrets. You have held
babies of your own, have seen this

pulse and heard the little fountain
gurgle its tenuous "I am," its
miraculous "I will." This is

your headwater: the source of your
Nile. Shot six, clean as mitosis,
shows the walnut shell split down

its center, each side like a winged
maple seed that makes a child's
whistle. Then sudden, shocking,

and bright as night mushrooms,
two bulbous moons rise: your
eyes surrounded by rock and spongy

as Play-Doh. In this sleight
of mind one marvel follows another
but when the great brain stem

sprouts into view you know this
is a godly thing like a single
braid announcing a pharaoh's

child: this is the true royal
coil. By shot twenty-two you
can see every hole in your

head. Your brain's spread out
like some gigantic Rorschach
blot: Kali rises from flame,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one powerful O'Keeffe flower
stirs in your windless sky.
At its bottom, the widening

brain becomes a horseshoe
crab scuttling across your
vast, boulder-strewn shore.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Elizabeth Alexander

Dream # 3

I wake from the dream another person, tasting metal or salt, smelling turpentine, my shoulder askew and my jaw out of whack. My father has not been stabbed in the hip by the auto mechanic, stabbed impossibly with a blunt hammer. I do not have to decide, do I call, do I not call the cops, what would Daddy want, or do; Oh God. None of this was real, but I know that strange things happen, that I dreamed to call my grandfather just before he died to find out his parents' names, and I did, and he died, and no one had known they were *Emma* and *James,* so even though now I can wash my face, eat lunch, and feel secure that Daddy is not dying on the lawn in Connecticut, that I was not raped even though I can smell the mechanic's rancid hair as I struggle to perceive my real body while symbols float around me in a rain of draughtsman's cutouts: telephone, hammer, oilcan, mechanic, I still wonder why I dreamed it, how I dreamed it, how is Daddy, how am I.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After

It wasn't as deep as I expected,
your grave, next to the grandmother who died
when I was three. I threw a flower in
and fizzled off the scene like carbonation.
My body of course remained but all else
was a cluster of tiny white bubbles
floating up, up, up, to an unseen top.

I wore your vicuna coat and an ill-
fitting cloche from Alexander's. I walked
among the rows, away from the men
covering the coffin, which was when I saw
"X," Malcolm, a few yards down, "Paul Robeson,"
then "Judy Garland," then—the car was waiting
and we had to go.

The cocktail parties
must be something there! You'd discuss self-help
and the relative merits of Garvey-
ism with Malcolm. Robeson would read
in a corner. Judy, divine in black
clam diggers, would throw back her head
and guffaw, smoke as many cigarettes
as she wanted.

Before you died I dreamed
of cocktail parties in your Harlem
apartment where you'd bring all our dead kin
back to life, for me! I was old enough
to drink with you, to wear a cocktail dress.
Like the best movies, the dream was black
and white, except for my grandmother's
lipstick, which was red.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(I never understood the passage . . . .

Lila ~~seated herself~~ on the couch in a pretty posture, ~~She has taken me from S.L. I sit on the couch beside her. She said,~~ "I ~~don't know why it is but I~~ never do as well in chairs." ~~A man sat~~ near us in a chair. Lila said, "Some people say it's boring to talk about the weather but I don't agree."

The man near us is a tough looking man older than most of the men there; he is crudely wrinkled, crudely formed, crudely enclosed in polite clothes.

He said, "Well, it's what I like to talk about. ~~I'm a farmer. I'm mostly a farmer~~. I ain't too worried about people who worry that it ain't right to talk about the weather."

"Your land's not in this county, is it?" ~~I know everyone who owns land in this county.~~ Lila said, not sure she wanted help S.L. or not.

"No. You're right. We got land in Madison County, but we are mostly rightly in Calhoun...Calhoun County..."

"Oh, apples. It's apples. Am I right?"

"Some but I an't th I um not rightly an apple man. not I um not. Well, I want to tell ya. I watered our lawn this morning. we got a lawn; wasn't a cloud in the sky..."

Lila said, "and then you worked..."

"Oh this is a crazy part of the world, we get crazy weather here..." ~~she lifted one hand to her hair...~~ "The weather here makes no sense ~~my grandad used to say~~ you need mountains to h[ave] reasonable weather in mountain..." "Or the river - that river - I don't know."

"Maybe the river upsets things - it's a big river..."

"This good for nothing cloudburst - I bet I got to replant and reseed. I got two leaks in the cow barn now. The horse barn is OK. I ditched the road in to the front of my place last spring - the

© Sara Barrett

Harold Brodkey

The Art of Fiction CXXVI

For the past thirty years Harold Brodkey has pursued a path unique in American letters. After publication of a volume of finely made short stories written in his twenties, First Love and Other Sorrows *(1958), many of which first appeared in* The New Yorker *and were acknowledged to be of outstanding promise, Brodkey began composition of an extended prose work, portions of which have been published in magazines and journals, and which have provoked a wide diversity of critical opinion—from Denis Donoghue's claim in* Vanity Fair *that it is a "work of genius" to suggestions that it may be a bloated hoax.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the meantime, the work became something of an object of desire for editors; it was moved among publishing houses for what were rumored to be ever-increasing advances, advertised as a forthcoming title (Party of Animals) *in book catalogues, expanded and ceaselessly revised, until its publication seemed an event longer awaited than anything without theological implications. In recent years, some critics, editors and publishing wags have begun to adopt, in relation to this native of the Show-Me state, what amounts to a somewhat peevish "put up or shut up" attitude, an opinion most explicitly advanced by Rhoda Koenig in* New York *magazine, who, referring to Ernest Hemingway's many posthumous publications bearing witness to that writer's industry, quipped that Brodkey alive was less prolific than Hemingway dead.*

Brodkey has, however, been publishing all along—some fifty pieces since the first collection. Yet he withheld publication of the manuscript in book form, and consequently was able to elude ultimate public judgment until November 1991, when Farrar, Strauss & Giroux published The Runaway Soul. *Still, Brodkey declines to say whether this is the first of a multivolume novel, or even that this is "The Book," the novel that had been advertised as* Party of Animals. *Reviews and advance notices contained divergent opinions, and still the only consensus on Brodkey's extended prose fiction remains that it is "long awaited."*

From his first published stories to the most recent, Brodkey has treated his childhood, boyhood and youth as if they were a well to which he could constantly return as a source of narrative. He was born in 1930 in Staunton, Illinois, and soon afterwards put up for adoption, a dislocation that provoked a severe withdrawal from the world—as a two-year-old he stopped speaking for more than two years.

He entered Harvard at sixteen, studied literature, and was an editor on the college literary magazine. He interrupted his studies for a year spent traveling in Europe. He married Joanna Brown just after graduation and soon found himself a junior executive at the NBC television network, commuting on the Harlem-Hudson line from Westchester county, where he lived with his new family. It was on this train that he planned the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

first writing produced in his adult life, a story, "State of Grace," edited and published by a fellow commuter whom he knew socially—William Maxwell of The New Yorker.

After publication of his first book of stories, he was awarded a residency fellowship in Rome by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The following years brought divorce, a brief involvement with the Group Theater, "legendary" sexual wandering, permanent residence on New York's Upper West Side, occasional teaching positions, work as a staff writer at The New Yorker, *the production of the stories "Innocence"—a touchstone, for want of a better word, of erotic literature—and "His Son, in His Arms, in Light, Aloft," a masterpiece of reminiscence, and finally the development of his later idiosyncratic mode of narrative.*

Brodkey married the novelist Ellen Schwamm in 1980, and published another collection, Stories in an Almost Classical Mode, *in 1988. Brodkey and Schwamm divide their time between an apartment on upper Broadway—the view to the south somewhat occluded now by the "luxury" apartment buildings thrown up in the development boom of the last decade—and a wood-frame Victorian house in a summer community up the Hudson.*

The meetings that formed this interview took place in the Manhattan apartment. At the outset Brodkey suggested the interview should be conducted without the aid of recording equipment and that the interviewer record his impressions of the meetings afterward, maintaining that this would be the best manner in which to capture the "truth" of the encounters. Indeed, when presented with the transcript of the proceedings of the first meeting using equipment, he complained of its quality and asserted that it bore no relation to the discussion that had taken place. Brodkey continued to be an elusive though solicitous subject.

The text that follows is based on five meetings that took place over the past three years. Once the process began, Brodkey made a habit of pronouncing "for the record" (and often most epigrammatically) on the phone when no tape recorder was available, or in a restaurant, or even at a party where no pen was at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hand. Some of this additional material has been added to the text. The whole, some three hundred and fifty pages, was edited, rearranged and revised by the interviewer, by Brodkey, by the editor of this magazine, and finally deemed by the subject to be "compromised" and "tainted," but ultimately a text he would allow to be attributed to him.

Conversation with Brodkey—whether in person, or on one of the many long phone calls he makes daily to friends and publishing types to check on the progress of culture, as one might inquire about the weather before venturing outside—can be an adventure. By turns immensely charming and socially clumsy, offering observations of acute honesty with an air of Delphic significance, or an opinion with the genial guardedness of a con man, Brodkey is always intelligent and engaged—often with a declarative and emotional urgency reminiscent of an actor trained in the Method school. To a degree unusual in a man his age—and he is wont to remind one that he is sixty, "an old man," in need of indulgence—he strikes one as remarkably unformed.

On entering the New York City apartment one is confronted with a legend—a wooden placard enjoining "Deeds not Words," an artifact, like the rest of the furniture in the house, of early nineteenth-century vernacular design from the Era of Good Feeling. Hallways extend toward the kitchen and pantries in one direction and bedrooms and studies in the other.

Brodkey's study is a large, white-walled made-over bedroom crowded with library tables, a drafting board, outlines and notes taped to the wall, and a collection of computer equipment worthy of a bond-trading room—computer systems of different makes, a monitor, another monitor of a vertical-rectangular shape that can show a single whole page of text, printers, and a scanner which Brodkey used to input the many pages of manuscript he wrote before he went "high tech." A long wall is lined at shoulder height with cabinets that one is assured, ominously, are fireproof.

HAROLD BRODKEY

Before we get started I just want to say one thing. When I was a kid I really did think that people would someday cheer for me, a kind of acknowledgment of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what I would do as a writer. Then, when I was in my mid-thirties, I was running at the West Side Y in New York, on the track that goes around up above the basketball court, and as I ran, I watched the basketball game being played below. McBurney School was playing someone or other. They came from behind and the game went into overtime, and they won; there was this huge outburst of cheering, screaming, kicking, and stamping on the floor. People shouting. I think the track is twenty-four laps to a mile, unless that's the swimming pool, and I was on about my twentieth lap, which is always rather an emotional time anyway, and I burst into tears, because, I finally realized, you know, they're never going to do that for a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Not unless you climb into the ring, the sports arena.

BRODKEY

Veronica Geng, who is very smart, and I were sitting around talking with George Trow and Ian Fraser. I don't know who brought up baseball, but I said I was jealous of baseball players' salaries; I said it bothered me that Dwight Gooden got so much more money a year for what he did than I got for what I did. So Veronica said, "But Harold, Dwight Gooden goes out and delivers exaltation on a regular schedule to a great many people on a reliable basis."

INTERVIEWER

Are you beginning to feel exposed?

BRODKEY

All of a sudden, when *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode* came out, I moved from being a kind of amiably well-regarded nobody to being not exactly an often hated somebody, but close. But you're not *really* somebody; you can't go around assuming that an enormous number of people have read your stuff and liked it; you can't be gracious, it isn't like that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

It would be nice, though, if *more* people would give you that opportunity to be gracious.

BRODKEY

Sure. Being an object of curiosity (and rivalry) is very peculiar when you're no longer young. You really spend an awful lot of your time in New York just being confused about how to act. Someone like Elaine, who runs that restaurant, she helps because she places you in the hierarchy. She'll try to tell you you're a certain kind of person, and that's a kind of an anchor. A lot of the time people insult you, tease you, insult your work, but sometimes it's flirtation, or a job offer, the prelude to an alliance. When *New York* magazine came out with my picture on the cover a couple of years ago, I would be walking down the street and people would pass me, and then I would see the same people again, a minute later; they'd circled around to see the cover in life. And I would think, what do I do? Should I smile? Do I really like this? What's the etiquette here? I think I did like it, but I'm not sure. It was bloody goddamn strange. On Broadway once I saw this guy about ten yards in front of me with a lively, educated, great face, smile at me. Then he began to applaud. Now, first of all, he was handsome and ironic, so I thought it was a joke. Or he was mad. But I thought, hell, go ahead, believe it. He raised his hands and clapped them, and as we started to pass each other, he said, "You're the best. Keep it up." "You too," I said stupidly. And I applauded him—I had no idea what I could do to thank him. Then there was this guy who followed me into Burger King, he asked for an autograph. He had about three coats wrapped around him, a homeless guy. I said my autograph wasn't worth much, and I gave him a buck. He said, "Sign it." The buck. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

Has this business about fame been a longtime concern?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

When I was a kid there was this show called "The Quiz Kids." I auditioned for the producers; they asked questions, but I quit part way through. I stopped trying, because I got this sense, you see, that there was this trap, that you had to merchandise yourself, be cute on cue. And then you'd be stuck with producing that effect, that personality, all your life; you'd never escape. There was a clear association in my mind of stardom and self-destruction, so much so that when Larry Rivers said at Frank O'Hara's funeral in the 1960s, "We all expected Frank to be the first of us to die," that really glittered with truth. It was the same with James Dean when he got killed, and Marilyn Monroe. But I had this sense when I was a young man that you got famous and then, one way or another, you killed yourself. Or you retired—deadened, burned-out, cynical, sour. Death and fame.

INTERVIEWER

You felt from the start this . . .

BRODKEY

I'm pretty sure, looking back, that I was afraid of being mediocre, ultimately, in the light of literary history. And yet at the same time I was determined that no one was going to say I was a great writer and catch me *that* way. I was interested in escaping *all* that bullshit. It was necessary that everything I did be good of its kind but that it not present greatness as an issue. When that is attached to the aura of a writer, you get two writers, one the narrator and then another—an in-between persona, the rumored immortal running for office, the office of rumored immortality.

There's a Yiddish word, *yenta,* for the sort of person who nags you all the time. Frank O'Hara was a yenta. I wasn't someone he publicized, but twice a year he would confront me and tell me that I was a great writer, a great artist, a great thinker, whatever, and that I was just hiding. And he would say that this was despicable. He would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say that the work was fantastic, that it had influenced him, but unfortunately (he would say), I was a middle-class drag, not serious about becoming famous and influencing the world. William Maxwell said many of the same things to me. I practiced evasion until I was forty.

INTERVIEWER

Evasion of what?

BRODKEY

Of being an honest, wholehearted, fame-spurred writer. A sucker. A writer—and eaten up by it. Then, when I was forty, I gave up. I stopped being evasive. I clumsily wanted to be known. An eaten man. I think—and I have some evidence from when I was a teacher—that most people who try to write can succeed but don't want to: I would argue that psychologically they would rather daydream about creating texts and being recognized while having real lives—they would rather do that than publish, I think.

INTERVIEWER

How did it turn out, after the evasion stopped . . .

BRODKEY

Well, a couple of reporters turned up and they asked me something like, "Don't you feel good that you took this risk and it came out all right, that you got what you wanted?"

INTERVIEWER

Your recognition factor shot way up?

BRODKEY

Half-recognition. A neighbor called me to congratulate me on winning the Nobel Prize. I had to tell her no, that was Joseph Brodsky. I was Brodkey.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Recognition is bothersome.

BRODKEY

Yes and no. But it's a hook that tears at you. Years ago, Susan Sontag made up an aphorism in conversation, and it went like this: "In this country once you're famous, you're famous until you die, but your status changes every day." This induces a kind of recognition-vertigo, a career-sickness, I think.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first think about getting involved in all this?

BRODKEY

The first time was when I was about eight or nine years old. It was a bad time for me. I was extremely unhappy. I was living with my adoptive parents, the Brodkeys. My father by adoption, Joe Brodkey, fell ill. We had no money anymore. I lost two friends, a guy who went to Hollywood and became a child actor, later a philosopher, and a girl I liked a lot who, though she was only eight, wanted to be a nun and who switched from private school to parochial school. I started feeling I wasn't going to be able to make it through the next week, the next month, the next couple of years, or life. Then I got this idea of being a writer someday. Then life, despair, became things I could study, like arithmetic or geometry, or *Time* magazine. It wasn't that everything was okay, but that they became handleable in a certain sense.

INTERVIEWER

An impulse that gave you some sense of order to life?

BRODKEY

To a reasonable extent. Do you remember being a child, and you leave the house, and you're kind of mad at everything but not really, and you just start walking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across this big, empty field or yard and you just can't imagine how you're going to go on? Because of the peculiar circumstances of my life I had to find a way to get along with my conscious mind, or I really couldn't exist, and one way to do that was to start thinking about my life as a story, or something to be interpreted or examined. I didn't think I was going to write about my childhood, but I thought I would write about something that would make things that were obscure to me clear . . . by setting up one of those tremendous structures of suspense in fiction. So just as you read on, you might *live* on, cross the road to get to the other side. You have some reason for going on, which was: "If I don't understand it now, I'll understand it later, and if I don't understand it later, I'll understand part of it later, and I'll go on for the sake of that."

INTERVIEWER

So were you actually writing then?

BRODKEY

No, or not often. I told stories to the other kids, but I didn't write them down, or keep a journal. I wrote a poem when my father died, and later I wrote a choral poem for twenty voices and soloists. It was performed in the school auditorium.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like?

BRODKEY

I remember the opening lines: "I am an American, the son of the son of an immigrant. . . . " The fact is that by birth I am the son of an immigrant, but by adoption the son of a son of an immigrant.

INTERVIEWER

Did you want to be famous then?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

Well, I certainly did think when I was a child that I would be famous someday. I thought I'd have a lot of money. I expected to write best-sellers and to be beloved and happy. . . . I thought that's what Sinclair Lewis was.

INTERVIEWER

Most people who grew up with books in their house grew up with best-sellers but not with literature.

BRODKEY

I knew that distinction; nearly everyone did when I was young. We had light opera and *opera.* But, by the time I was fourteen, I knew Jane Austen better than Margaret Mitchell. I remember getting into fights with teachers over literary craft, technical stuff: the structures and the seams, the variables of narrative, lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow stuff. The three books I read over and over, partly to see how they worked, but also because I liked them, were *Gone with the Wind, The Three Musketeers,* and *Pride and Prejudice.* I did read *Emma* and *Persuasion* and Thomas Mann and Steinbeck and Hemingway and Cervantes but the three others are the ones I *adopted* as setting the basic levels of narrative—the chronicles of one person and an unsentimental view of women, the interplay of men, and betrothal stories.

INTERVIEWER

You grew up in St. Louis, which has a reputation for spawning writers—Eliot, Inge, Williams, Burroughs . . .

BRODKEY

People in St. Louis talked, oddly enough, like simpler Eliots, inhibited William Burroughses and shy Tennessee Williamses. Williams and I had the same high school English teacher.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Did she say Williams was a pretty good student?

BRODKEY

She said he was A Horrible Person. I found his name carved into the wooden desk where I sat. Tennessee Williams was the obverse of Eliot, and at the same time was like him. When I was at Harvard I'd get drunk and I'd recite Eliot and I'd sound like a character in Williams. I don't think I honestly ever saw a Williams play, or reacted to one as a member of the audience because I identify so with the background out of which the work comes. All of the writers from St. Louis have a vaguely similar dependence on metaphor . . . Burroughs, Fred Seidel . . .

I do think, seriously but without much study, that the influence of Eliot, and the influence of Eliot's becoming famous did affect people like Williams and William Inge. I knew Inge in New York at the Actors' Studio. Tennessee Williams and I used to swim at the West Side Y together but we never spoke to each other.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever clap as he walked by, cheer for *him*?

BRODKEY

No. At bottom there's a dishonesty in artists.

INTERVIEWER

How important is memory?

BRODKEY

I use the past but not as memory so much as what I know. Often I make a conscious decision not to remember. Ordinary memory is dangerous to me. I had an operation when I was eight years old and I had a very bad reaction to the anaesthesia—I went into convulsions. They had to hold me down and pack me in ice. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anaesthesia gave memory free run, and that was unbearable. It was always clear to me where the dangerous things were in memory. I am always aware that I am not remembering. I have the sense that if I push too hard or too far into memory I'll come apart—not only a loony-bin sort of thing, but a real shattering. Self-loss.

INTERVIEWER

But you did begin to make use of memory to write.

BRODKEY

I don't use memory. . . . I make constructions.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start to write?

BRODKEY

I started to write in college when I was sixteen; I began to take writing classes. But I had no interest in memory stories. I didn't write *any.*

INTERVIEWER

Did you like Harvard?

BRODKEY

I was truly private, or anonymous, if you prefer. As a freshman at Harvard I felt young and dowdy and poor for the first time in my life—an outcast—and fatuous and stupid. I had real friends for a while, a kind of easy and untwisted interchange with people: that sort of thing. I was so happy I went a little crazy. In reality people like you and dislike you for your attributes, but that's not the same as them handing you a manuscript of theirs after a kiss: girls or guys coming on to you because they want your life, they want to live your life, your professional life.

A guy at Harvard named Amory, bright, talented, well-connected, told me I was lucky to be an outsider—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pathetic, unfamilied, shabby, nonsectarian, unmonied. It was a reality and it was a role, too. This Amory guy told me I wasn't weighted down. I could be talented, I could starve to death, I could sleep with whom I wanted—whereas *he* always had a number of other things to consider in those matters.

He said I was lucky and I always ought to distrust the thing of being accepted. He felt superior but tragic: I think he was sincere. Harold Bloom tells me many of the same things still: there is great heroism and also obvious kinds of living death—the actual kind, both from internal sorrows and from external circumstances, all the forms of assassination once you publish and become known. It may be the realest and trickiest and most violent thing you can do—to be published. The "silly *Charybdis*"—a childhood joke—of the insoluble thing of the choice proposed: to live or to publish.

INTERVIEWER

Were there any teachers at Harvard in particular you remember?

BRODKEY

All of them. Mark Schorer. Theodore Morrison who hadn't read Faulkner or Hemingway but who was teaching writing. His favorite writer was A.B. Guthrie who had recently written something called *The Big Sky.* A.J. Guerard Jr.—he played a kind of parlor game that got under my skin. You were supposed to come up with one word that expressed "the essence" of a writer. The word for Faulkner was *outrage.* The word for Stendhal was *altitude.* Archibald MacLeish. I was rude to MacLeish because he read Rilke in translation with an Irish accent. He was actually quite a good teacher, well informed. Rilke and Yeats weren't widely admired in this country back then.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Were John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara your classmates?

BRODKEY

No. They were ahead of me. They'd been in the service. They were already wicked and grown-up, and tremendously bright, of course. A cousin of mine at Harvard took me to meet Frank. Frank was at the piano playing something weird. I said, "What is that?" Frank said, "It's Scriabin. Do you know it?" I said, "No, but I can spell Scriabin." I couldn't afford to buy records that year—I stole them. I stole "The Poem of Ecstasy." There was a moment—literally a moment—when Ashbery and O'Hara decided that Eliot was out and Wallace Stevens was the only poet to be interested in. Even before Ashbery switched to Stevens there was in his writing this evasiveness, this sense that God was dead and meaning was impossible to come by; the same elegance that you find in him now. And there was Robert Bly, who was the Pegasus, the poetry editor, on the *Advocate.* But I was personally evasive and not close to any of them.

At Harvard, then, everybody suffered. I refused at that time to undergo the kind of self-examination and despair and alienation that most people did then in college. I took a year off and went to Europe. I gained a little culture, was offered a couple of jobs. I wanted to have adventures. I wanted to drive across Africa in a Jeep. I wanted to go parachute jumping, though not enough to do it. I practically became a spy. At the same time I had this strong feeling for certain writers. Rimbaud, Fitzgerald. Characters who all wrote well young and who died young. I expected to die young. I'd expected to be neurotic and ill and helpless, and then it didn't happen like that: I was robust—even rosy. I was strong physically. I thought about becoming an actor. I had a chance to start as a script boy in a company of actors that Olivier was starting up in London.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

You were offered a job?

BRODKEY

I had a screen test in Paris. It was clear that I hadn't read Stanislavsky, that I hadn't even heard about Stanislavsky. I was a very bad actor, but the face was usable; it was confident in some odd way, *normal.* I was naked-faced, even transparent, and obvious—it was sickening—but I looked American as hell. To whatever extent Europeans wanted to maintain any culture from the past, they were anti-American, but mostly they were drawn to American types. I looked like a drugged and melted Henry Fonda. I didn't tell them I was a Jew. Anyway, they took me to be an American type—I didn't really look the way I do now. And I was tall: they were interested in that. And the braininess showed. So I was a tall, semischolarly American type. Sort of noticeable, and undefended looking. Anyway, when I saw the rushes, the test, I started to throw up and run a fever. The reality of being that person, of having to learn to act, made me ill.

INTERVIEWER

So you came back to Harvard and got married?

BRODKEY

Yes. My first wife and I married the day before commencement, and we went out West. We wanted to get away from everybody. She had seen a copy of a magazine called *Arizona Highways.* I had asked her what she wanted to do, and she was surprised I was willing to do what *she* wanted and not drag her along with me where *I* wanted to go. I wanted to go in the Army. I wanted her to follow *me* around, take care of me, all that, but why not be nice? It sounds strange, I know, sort of dishonest, but I wanted, so far as I knew, her to be happy *her* way, not merely as a shadow. She wanted to write. She was also going to be an actress. All of those young things. I took her seriously.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She wound up a vice-president of Estée Lauder before she quit working. I went along with all this.

We came back East and I worked at the National Broadcasting Company. I started there as a page. They wanted me to prove I wasn't arrogant, which of course I was. But I "proved" I wasn't because I *was* . . . you understand? I had a gray flannel suit and an attache case. That was after I was promoted.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have grand ideas about television? About being a part of it?

BRODKEY

I didn't have any money and I wanted to make some. Life in America is based on speculations of this kind: what are the good fields to go into? Where do you have a chance to become rich? The stock market? Oil? Metals? (It wasn't time for plastic yet.) Morgan Guaranty or Morgan Stanley: whichever was the good one—there was a *good* Morgan you were supposed to try to get a job with. In college some of the impressive professors told me this was not a country where it was safe to be smart—they told me to stay at Harvard and try to be a scholar. If you left Harvard for the big world, you had to have a very cool facade. Television was new. I thought it had a future. It was already glamorous. It was sort of a frontier, and anyway I was unemployable in most fields of work. Unemployable in the nicest way.

INTERVIEWER

What's the story behind your first publication?

BRODKEY

I came home one day and my wife was washing sheets in the bathtub. I had this "normal" thing about earning a living for my family—protecting them: if there was a danger I would stand in front of them and die for them,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I thought. At the same time I had this sense of being out of step with society. By American standards I was on the overeducated side, and more than just a little bit too fancy. And not by birth.

So I decided to write a story for money. I wanted to do a fancy Henry James sort of story about a wicked tutor and a dumb boy. It was going to be about making use and not making use of people. Do you know that thing about having a life that is a secret from your mother? But your father knows a little bit about it? But there's part of it which is secret from him too? It was going to be about *evil* of that sort. I made a great many notes, but I never wrote the story until one day the story became clear to me. I had come home from work, and I asked my wife if dinner was ready. She said it would be ready in about five minutes. So I asked if she could delay it about forty-five minutes or so, and she said yes, and I wrote the story in the forty-five minutes. It was not the story I'd had in mind, but it was a kind of story that I'd had in mind for years. We knew William Maxwell. I gave the story to Maxwell on the train. He read it and telephoned me that day. He was crying. He said it was good, that he didn't think *The New Yorker* would publish it though he'd see that someone else did.

INTERVIEWER

He was an old friend?

BRODKEY

A new friend of mine. An old friend of my wife's. I never said to him that I wanted to be a writer, but he knew I did, and he got me to admit I did. I told him I'd already made up my mind that I wasn't going to write in my twenties. If I started writing in my thirties, by then I would have had a life of some kind. But he lured and dared me to try. That is not to say the sheets-in-the-bathtub were unimportant. But Maxwell as a literary tempter excited the field of response, the literary nerve.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He talked me out of writing under a pseudonym. Anyway, *The New Yorker* bought the story. It was called "State of Grace." *The New Yorker* was not really my taste. I probably preferred *Partisan Review* at the time, but *The New Yorker* was more American, it used better English; it certainly was more flexible politically. But it wasn't the place I'd dreamed of to publish in. So it happened. And *The New Yorker* has been my home ever since. Life is very odd.

INTERVIEWER

This was the first story in *First Love and Other Sorrows?*

BRODKEY

It's the one about the babysitter.

INTERVIEWER

No evil in it.

BRODKEY

No evil. No Henry James. I'd spent weeks preparing to do the story. I'd written dozens of paragraphs. Pieces of dialogue. But the actual writing took forty-five minutes, and the story became quite different. It wasn't that the story changed conscious direction. It was that I told myself a lie about the story to get started and all the time it was about a related matter and not about itself—the self I was conscious of. Actually I was prepared for this to happen. As I was writing I kept saying to myself, "This is wrong. This is really quite cheap." But I wanted to write it only in this form. I would have stopped writing it entirely but I did want to get my wife a washing machine.

INTERVIEWER

It chose you, or did you choose it?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

I can't tell you. I prepare a story and then when I start to write something else emerges. It seems to be the way I work.

INTERVIEWER

You talked before about wanting to escape becoming a public figure; how did the enormous reaction to your first story affect you?

BRODKEY

I didn't know how to act, what to do. George Plimpton said don't think about it, and took me to a literary party down in the Village, stood by me and introduced me to people. At a certain point he said, "Now handle it."

There's a certain sense in which becoming public kills the life you had before. I've been reading a book on the Jameses, and it's quite clear that once Henry starts writing and publishing, while he still sees his sister and he writes to his brother, he's *separate* from the family. It happens almost at once.

At first one has two lives. One is the literary life in New York, *The New Yorker,* people who've read what you've written; and the other is the life you have with your old friends. In those days I was more athletic than I am now; I'd go and play tennis, or canoeing with old friends . . . but after a while they don't *trust* you. At the job I had, the people there didn't *trust* me. "You're going to write about it, you're going to write about it." "I'm *not* going to write about it," but no one *believes* you. Then they think, "Is he laughing at me?" And suddenly you're more at home with strangers, with other writers, than with the people you've been at home with for years.

There were maybe four or five years of the double life: of being a writer and still being a person. Then by, say, 1957, before *First Love* came out, I was really fed up. Between the two I really thought I'd rather be a person than a writer. Starting in 1959 I began the slow retreat into reclusiveness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Except, remember, I was publishing all that time. I didn't vanish—I was around. . . . I made money ghostwriting. I played the stock market a little bit. No one pointed a finger at me and said, "My God he's a good writer." No one wrote pieces about me.

INTERVIEWER

I'm still unclear why you were so reluctant to continue after your success.

BRODKEY

It was something about being a young man and being part of the society of the time. I wasn't prepared to assert myself as an independent voice arguing and howling. Here was a society with certain cultural preconceptions about time and cognition and about middle-class principles—and a secular lack of them—and fixed notions about how one hears speech and what the structure of a moment is—and all my ideas, all, were different from those. I didn't want to be famous; I wanted to live. I didn't want to be a moral barbarian either. If I'd been a more serious person, if the culture had been of a more serious order, I would have been, oh, more ambitious, barbarically or civilizedly. But I couldn't hack it. I did have moments of seriousness. I did write a novel. It got turned into a short story. Well, it was a short novel. I suppose I should have fought harder. I might have spent more time being serious. As it was, I enjoyed my life until I was thirty or thirty-one. Then I went to work seriously and probably harder than I would have if I hadn't been haunted by how I'd spent my twenties. I had no idea that it would take me so long to work out what I wanted to write. I really did think that two or three short, quick novels would set me free from the world of ideas I had, and then I would write other sorts of books.

INTERVIEWER

Have you worked in other genres?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

When I was thirty-four or thirty-five I signed a contract with Rust Hills, who was at *The Saturday Evening Post* then, to write a murder mystery. It was based on a real situation. When Henry Ford got older he hired a gangster named Harry Bennett to handle the unions at the Ford Motor factory, and soon it became clear that Bennett was running the company, a major company—the only time that I know of a known gangster openly controlled a major company. I wanted to do a story about the family of the owner and the gangster; about the clash between the children of the owner and the gangster's amoral and semilegendary brutality, the moral ruin and defeat of the kids . . . the painful anarchy of evil. I tried to create a cotton empire in Memphis with this guy running it and growing old and becoming distressed with his sons and turning to the gangster in all sorts of absolutist rages. I wanted him killed in a truly violent way that looked accidental. I had fifteen or twenty suspects—a chauffeur, a pilot, a valet, a wife, a mistress, in-laws, a lawyer, a lot of people. I planned the murder for about page sixty-five. I started to write. I had to set out the corporation. I tried to show how the owner was really drawn to his daughter-in-law who loathed him. . . . How he couldn't bear his son, who was, after all, a rich boy. I wasn't writing very well; I struggled on and after ten months I got to page six hundred and nobody was dead yet. So I gave up.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe you should have killed him on the first page and gone on from there.

BRODKEY

Most mysteries begin with a whine about life being empty, the detective broke and waiting for something to happen. That's what I should have done. Instead I did it my way, which didn't work, and by the time it was appar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ent it didn't work I was exhausted and frightened, seriously frightened by what I had found out about myself as a writer . . . the ways my writing will and won't meet me half-way. The ways I have to behave or the writing will stay dead.

INTERVIEWER

Well, what *is* your way? I wonder if there is some relation to Method acting?

BRODKEY

It's something like that. American Method acting is a peculiar creation of Strasberg's, Elia Kazan's and Arthur Penn's—the underlying theory is very solid, about using yourself to create something. In my twenties before I did a final draft I would read Stanislavsky for the stuff about truth and the methods he indicates for substituting one kind of experience for another actual experience shaped into imaginary experience.

The Actors' Studio put certain ideas into circulation, created huge images . . . Brando for one. I thought Brando was fantastic, and I tried to imitate his honesty. After the first collection came out in 1958, I was involved with the Studio and I worked on a play for a year, but I abandoned it rather than start in on the rewrites the producer—Irene Selznick—wanted.

INTERVIEWER

How do you go about actually writing?

BRODKEY

There are about nine hundred million aphorisms about writing that are true, and one of them comes from Bill Maxwell. "All short stories should be written in a sitting." As I understood it, that meant that you could spend weeks, months, years writing drafts, outlines, notes, sections, but sooner or later you ought to take all that and sit down and write a draft in a sitting, in a single

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flight—which might take days or weeks but without interruptions—so that the broad elements and the nuances cohere, certain echoes, certain resonances fit together, and there is real motion in the narrative—not a false motion linguistically grafted onto the story. Words have a strangely changeable, contingent kind of meaning, and as T.S. Eliot said in one of his famous essays, the music of language carries more of the realer meaning than the literal meaning of words does. A shift in the mind, in the mood, and you lose control of that music. Often, in a text you can see the fracture points where the music was lost and then regained or not. If not, the piece stays flat. A final draft has always been a little bit like a dramatic performance, but a performance that can sometimes last for several days with very little sleep; what sleep there is is troubled. The longest single sitting I can remember lasted for six days. I had to have Ellen stand by the desk from time to time I was so mixed up as to where I was, what was real. She would tell me what time of day it was; her voice was how I located myself.

There's the real time it takes to write a story. Then there's the time the reader spends reading, which varies wildly. Then there's the curious interplay of certain kinds of fictional time in the narrative structure. But whatever the time in the story is, you're actually reading it in your own sense of time—your sense of your parents' lives, or history, whatever—superimposed on the writer's. And then there's usually a subtextual time, set by the allusions and references—in *Ulysses,* for instance, the references to almost all of recorded history. At any rate, when you're finishing something, every thought which is outside a certain range is an interruption—not enough of an interruption to change the other person you are who goes out and gets the mail, but enough to change the story.

INTERVIEWER

All this in longhand?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

At first, always. The first notes. Then I do a draft on a computer, which I correct in longhand. I enter the corrections on the computer. The typewriter was a terrible trial for me; it's too goddamn linear. You can't actually project a genuine thought on a typewriter, it's so mechanical. And it's rattling away while you're watching and thinking and getting it down. You can only recite on a typewriter; it gets into the prose, into the sense of story, into the sense of character. You're pounding away and so is the typewritten story. So for me it's longhand plus my trusty MacIntosh. You drag this thing up out of silence. And sometimes it's good; but sometimes it's just awful sludge smeared on the paper. But then something in you sometimes knows you can do something with it, or the something in you that says that you can't do something with it is lying; or maybe something in you says you can't do anything with it and you *really* can't and you throw it away, and you start over again. Sometimes all you need is one honest sentence which will be the key to correcting the mess, to getting one master draft at a sitting. To be honest to your work you may have to turn your back on money, or turn your back on certain aspects of yourself that you would have preferred to keep. In return for giving in to the work, you do get a kind of freshness in relation to the adventure on paper. And then there are these wonderful moments when you're writing reasonably well and you like what you've written and you daydream that it's the greatest thing ever written and it's all hunky-dory. You're pleased with your life until you read the text over and you see it's got its problems. Or you find a sentence, and there's something good in it, but it's mostly a lie as it stands; if you've been really corrupted you go with the lie for the sake of the part that's okay; but if you're lucky and obstinate about protecting your virtue as a writer, then you can try to correct the sentence, refine it, rescue the truer part, replace the crap. But it's very nervous work.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Often writing is like a struggle to get back to a kind of belated, quite impure virginity where the issues are not entirely those of corruption and despair. Everything you know about language, writing, talking, holding an audience, everything you have theorized about what was wrong about the work of the generation before you and is wrong in your contemporaries' work emerges in the performance stress of writing a final draft or the master draft in one sitting.

INTERVIEWER

Why? Why one sitting?

BRODKEY

For a good writer the issue is whether you can be alive in the moments of creation or whether you're a nervous robot with a dead text.

INTERVIEWER

The last draft is surely the most exacting.

BRODKEY

The main draft is the hardest thing, the most exciting, the most demanding. But the cruelest to bear is the beginning, the confrontation with the blank sheet of paper, where you have the chance to get up and turn your back on being a writer. You think, "I'll quit, I'll live a real life as a citizen; I'll belong to the PTA and love my children. And have a country house."

Actually, I recommend doing two drafts at a sitting—each at a separate sitting—one draft good enough to publish. But then I think you should start to play, to pummel it, not in terms of material or language necessarily, but starting all over again in terms of persona and direction. You write it in the freer spirit of already having a usable version. You've set a time limit for yourself. Sometimes the real final draft is a collation of three versions: the responsible version, the playful version, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the last version, which has to be checked against the first two to produce the true final version. At this stage the self that is the ringmaster splits off and guards the outside of the sentences.

INTERVIEWER

What does that mean?

BRODKEY

I think there's an inside and an outside to a sentence, and to a sequence of sentences. The inside is what *you* think, what *you* think you're saying; the outside is what somebody else thinks you're saying, and about you saying it. Editors and critics always feel they possess the inside—I don't know why. If you want to be a swindler, you'll agree with them that they see the inside better than you do. If you *don't* want to be a con man, and you want it to be good, and you don't want an editor to fix it for you, then you wait a few weeks, you sulk, you get drunk or you smoke a couple of joints depending on what degree of derangement of the senses your theories of art require. You wander around and get in trouble until you experience amnesia; and then you go back to your pages as a reader, as an editor. The story has outgrown you. You have to work on it humbly. The guy that did the work on this part has died on you. Or changed so much you can use the term *die.* What happens to writers who are merely professional is that when the familiar figure of what they've been dies on them, they go haywire, and then they fake a resurrection. They don't let it grow back on its own, from the interplay of factors out of which narrative arises. They force it. This shows in the prose.

INTERVIEWER

Is one of the reasons it has taken you so long to publish this work that, like a kind of Diogenes, you had to find this perfectly honest sentence?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

Why did it take me so long? The audience didn't like what I did; it was very difficult to publish the way I wanted to publish. Nobody said I was untalented; they said, you have to do it this way. I may have just sulked. I have to put it in the conditional subjunctive . . . I *may* have. I often did try to publish bits of the novel, but people didn't particularly like it. Let's say I have a batting stance as odd as Stan Musial's, and I'm not as good as Stan Musial. I clearly have a problem at the plate. And this coach says you have to straighten up your stance. But I know if I'm going to do anything it's got to be in that stance. So I've got to find a coach who's going to put up with the way I have learned.

INTERVIEWER

Would you give this sort of advice to someone starting out?

BRODKEY

Well, of course, it would be tailored to the individual. But I think it's far better for a young writer starting out to work with a literary magazine or at someplace like *The New Yorker* or *The New York Review of Books* than to study with somebody. There is less risk of suicide or madness if you don't attach yourself to a person who is directly overseeing the way you're learning to write. Also, it's better not to have a program when you're starting out—it's a very rare literary figure who has a sense of her or his own gift and a sense of an audience, of the language. Usually when you're growing up, you're given a maternal language, and then you're forced into a family language—partly male and partly female—and then you have a school language in which there's a lot of coercion. However you want to talk, you have to work your way towards it; the best way to do that is to attach yourself to some person or some institution connected to language you admire.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's a little like learning to play tennis. With tennis, you bat a ball a lot, usually against the wall, before you're allowed to play with a coach or a better player: you hit the ball *often* before you actually get down to the game. So you really should be prepared to write a great many sentences, a great many pages, writing letters to your friends, to yourself, writing stories and showing them to friends, before you make up your mind to begin even your first attempt. You should also read. You really can't write unless you read. You have to know what the game is all about.

As you begin to change, there's a horrible transformation from being a person to being a writer. Roland Barthes said that he regretted being a writer because then he knew he would never speak the language of his contemporaries. There is a movement away from ordinary life, from statistically normal life, the kind of life that most people of your class lead, into this other specialization that is really only bearable at the beginning.

INTERVIEWER

Do you like to have an editor commenting on your work as it's being done?

BRODKEY

I do think that whether you're painting or writing or acting or sculpting or singing, that if you're lucky—and this is what happened to me when I was young—you discover a sense that all arts are social in the way one looks at them, whether one buys them or not, and in the way they're created. You need someone. Now that doesn't mean that you're not alone in the moment of creation, but there is no such thing as a private language which is truly comprehensible. To create a story you must have some sense of an audience. There is no such thing as a general audience. When I was teaching, I used to tell the students don't just imagine a reader, or yourself as reader; try to use somebody specific. Almost any

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kind of editor is of some use. The wrong kind of editor, though he can do harm, is of use to some extent. You have to have somebody who keeps reminding you that what you know about language isn't all there is to know, that there is an extraordinary complexity in getting across to somebody something you want to say to somebody else. What an editor represents is simply the outside world, not all of it, but that outside world that he or she represents, actually *does* represent, and usually knows that part of the world better than I do. That is, an editor is of greatest use to the extent that he or she controls access to a constituency. Sometimes an editor says, "This character is vague," or whatever; that's all very well, but to me what the editor is saying is, "This character will not be comprehended by the people who buy the books that I edit." This has to be resisted because often there's an unconscious desire on the part of everybody to write your manuscript or to put their imprint on it in a way that reflects their views and not your own.

INTERVIEWER

"Make better." Isn't that the famous *New Yorker* phrase?

BRODKEY

They never said that to me. I'll give you an example of what Maxwell did. He would say of a certain sentence, "This is not a true sentence. Now say it in such a way that it would be true." A little on the Wittgensteinian order of the "sayable sentence." The editor can check things like coherence, and he can determine the level of discourse. I talk to you differently from the way I talk to my wife; and I write differently depending on my relationship to the editors I'm using at a given moment.

INTERVIEWER

This gets back to your idea of the "outside" of a sentence. Is this what you address yourself to when you're preparing to send your work into the public forum?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

A kind of writing solely meant for a public forum is often less interesting than writing where the writer has invented the public space inside the text, in the tone of address, in the tone of the language—where the address is new and, as if in private. Public language is never new. But in good writing there is something absolutely new in the tone. There's a very complicated idea that lies behind the notion of the public space in which the narrator addresses the reader. It's an idea that has to do with language being actual, being temporal and spatial, to be Kantian about it. In a piece of writing the language runs along on the page and in the mind of a reader; in that language is no actual physical space, but it should carry the implication of a physical-social location. If you've been to a large Edwardian house you may have seen a small room with a fireplace and a couch, and perhaps two chairs—not a formal, large room where you can carry on, but one where you can sit and talk. It's where you gossip. Henry James has a tone of address as if he's arrived at such a large house, not his own, and he is seated by the fire; an invisible interlocutor or audience listens closely. Walt Whitman speaks outdoors it seems to me. The space Whitman suggests is complex and American and I think beautiful and a completely new invention. One thing that is unique about it is that there's no tinge of social class in it whatsoever. Jane Austen's writing suggests a drawing room sort of space; Hemingway's, on a bar stool or in a club car; it changes: he's complicated. Emily Dickinson creates a marvelous public space too, and one of the marvelous things about it is that it is so clearly an invention since it isn't based on being public; it is without a sense of the public. D.H. Lawrence is an absolutely amazing writer, with a fantastic sense of the language, but his sense of public space wavers, and sometimes a whole book or long story of his will collapse when he shifts the public space thing too drastically and is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

churchly-fascistic, or starts yelling as if in a corral, then muttering in a hallway . . . no order in it at all.

INTERVIEWER

Is this also a factor with writing, say, criticism?

BRODKEY

One of the reasons critical writing is not often as interesting as fiction is that criticism is part of an ongoing dialogue; it should never be in a space that you've invented; the space for it was invented a long time ago. But in fiction you have this other thing—the variety of spaces in which the voice of the writer comes to you in the piece. I think this is a major part of what's called *voice.* You imagine the space, and then create the voice to fill it. To write for publication, for a large public forum might require a widely declamatory voice. Or a specially projected one. The public space I've used from the beginning is not that sort, but is a kind of space for talking to someone that I first imagined as a literary possibility when I was sixteen and went off to college—youth, a certain kind of American speech set in a social category that establishes the kind of speech . . . doubt and incipient American rebellion. This is projected in the narrator *and* hopes to find a sympathetic response in the reader. I try to imagine myself addressing such readers one at a time. Sometimes you get awfully lost trying to write, and then if you're lucky you'll see someone in some other field solving this problem. I remember seeing Willie Mays addressing the ball and then grinning shamedly as he rounded second base, aware and unaware of the audience—that gave me an idea I used in "Story in an Almost Classical Mode." I remember seeing a Paul Taylor dance called "Sunset" and I was set up for weeks after that because it was so good and so useful—its notion of courtesy toward the dance and towards the audience. There are some writers for whom Picasso does this. For me, Matisse, and some Italian painters.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When I was in my twenties there was a Bronzino at the Frick, a portrait of a young man from here down to about here. That was what I was after in my first stories. That's where I got the final idea for the public space in the first book of stories. Bronzino cut down the amount of space around the figure; you simply cannot escape the sense, no matter how mannered the presentation, that this guy actually existed. The psychological reality of the portrait is increased by the fact that the guy knows he's on display, and he's confronting that. It's not like Frans Hals where somebody is *sitting* for a portrait. This is a young man showing off in a restricted space—pretty much what I had in mind to do. I took Frank O'Hara to see the Bronzino; he said he imitated Bronzino too. Then we went and looked at Rembrandt's "Polish Rider," which became a kind of dim presence in a lot of his poetry; a more complex and iridescent version of the same thing—and a far less passive representation.

INTERVIEWER

Is there one person in mind when you sit down?

BRODKEY

They tend to be specific people sitting across the desk from me while I write. I try never to use an imaginary reader. And I always try to play two readers against one another, actual people I know, and know in relation to literature. Once you get going, there is this necessity for grace and luck. You don't really know that it is going to work. And so the person sitting across the desk you're imagining is partly a muse.

INTERVIEWER

Whom Norman Mailer refers to as a "bitch goddess?"

BRODKEY

No, no. It can't be a bitch. But there's a cruelty there. If you fail, this figure won't step across the desk and save

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bronzino, Ludovico Capponi. *Courtesy of The Frick Collection, New York.*

you. But if you prepare, there is no possibility of that kind of failure unless you lose your nerve. Unless your mind is gone.

INTERVIEWER

What does *nerve* mean?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

It takes a certain amount of nerve just to be a writer. Nobody has the same attitude. Somebody once asked me what I would do if my two dead mothers walked into the room.

INTERVIEWER

The usual question put to Brodkey?

BRODKEY

The usual question. . . . All I could think of was I would lose my nerve: do they know I'm a writer? Do I tell them I'm a doctor? Or a business man? Someone they could respect.

INTERVIEWER

Is nerve involved in publication?

BRODKEY

I don't know that I can deal with publication. In this country, to be published, to become a figure—a Mailer, a Styron, a Roth—is really not worth it. They give far more than they get. I don't know if they sit around drinking and saying that to each other, but that's what I see. They exert their will to get to a certain position and then find that they're stuck running almost a charitable trust for the rest of their lives. Roth has to go on playing Roth until he dies. Any time he just tries to be himself, he has to do so off stage, but it costs a fortune to find a little corner of the world that he can control.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a great stack of manuscripts of the books somewhere?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

If I die tomorrow and my literary executor starts wading through the paper, there are five or six books that can be put together, but the structure would be a little bit odd. There are about three books that I've more or less finished, and placed the manuscripts in a cupboard near the door so I can grab them in case of a fire on my way out.

INTERVIEWER

What are the contents of the fireproof cabinets in your office?

BRODKEY

I have only one fireproof cabinet in the office. It contains an early play, the kind of manuals that tell you how to work your stereo, old leases, some correspondence, maybe one letter from Frank O'Hara, a child's book I wrote called *Jeffey with Wings* (actually I didn't write it, I stole it from my daughter who told it to me) certain attempts to lay out material of the novel, a lot of failed journalism—a long piece I tried to write for *The New York Times* about the United States; I spent six months working on it and was told it was too intellectual; William Shawn of *The New Yorker* told me it was probably the worst piece of journalism he had ever read in his life.

INTERVIEWER

Would you write if there were no audience?

BRODKEY

Language doesn't exist without an audience.

INTERVIEWER

You obviously have such an enormous concern about becoming a public figure that I don't understand why you go through the agonies of it. Wouldn't you be perfectly satisfied not writing?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

I'm satisfied not publishing. It takes a tremendous amount of nerve, of intelligence, as well as a certain neural setup to be a public figure.

INTERVIEWER

You're bad at it.

BRODKEY

I'm bad at it, and that seems to attract interest. People seem to like to watch me falling on my face. I don't know how to deal with it.

INTERVIEWER

So how do you feel about the path you've chosen as a writer?

BRODKEY

Oh, it was all a mistake but what the hell. And who cares? I worry still: is what I do useful? Is it morally worthwhile? Is it of profit to the culture that I do it? And, selfishly, I wonder if this is the way I want to spent my life. Do I want to write the way I do? Yes and no. I've come to terms with it. I don't ever remember a time when I couldn't write fairly well. And in a certain kind of American-Puritan or Jewish–American-Puritan way it seemed to me that because of circumstances I was given certain things; so I did feel obligated to make use of them, to do something with them, to make something public out of them. But survival indicated that you, too, ought to profit from this stuff, and that changed the terms. It was really quite clear that the only way you could have any kind of independence in this society was to keep publishing to the point where you became one of the authorities. Either that or go mad and die. But it's kind of real either way, and not romantic, not a romance. If you try to write and are *not* one of a school there is a dichotomy between you and the American public that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you have to deal with. You really are like a tramp, a hobo. It goes back to the familiarity thing in language and to the Freudian thing about the Other who is an enemy. Pynchon's paranoia would not have such an enormous audience if it did not reflect a genuine and widespread feeling. People get together and they decide what's acceptable, or what's to be understood as acceptable; we do this in high school. We do it at family holidays. I'm not particularly acceptable to any group. A couple of years back I went to see *Star Wars,* and I didn't understand a word of it. So I hung around in the lobby, and waited until a mother and her child—a really talkative mother and an inquisitive child—appeared and then I followed them in and sat behind them. The child asked questions—lots of them—and the mother explained and explained. After a while, I caught on to how the storytelling worked. But I'm a bit out of it, you know. I don't know anybody else in my generation who's been so constrained by considerations of getting published as I've been.

INTERVIEWER

I'm sure everyone has had these difficulties.

BRODKEY

Years ago, I worked out a theory; it's feebleminded. It's about writers with no money and writers with money of their own. There's a very fancy list of unmonied writers: Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Cervantes, for starters. Then there are the writers like Tolstoy, Flaubert, Jane Austen and Henry James, who had money and went their own way. They published a lot, or a little. Often, they published their own things. Tolstoy did. Proust did. James didn't, but Edith Wharton paid his publisher to publish him. So they're examples of a whole non-public way of working . . .

INTERVIEWER

But you *are* public. You've published books. Your work appears in magazines.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRODKEY

Yes. And I have no money. But I write like a writer with money. That writer's not necessarily in charge of me when I'm not writing. A mysterious person sitting here giving this interview is actually in charge of that writer. That writing self, well, it is unusable in the world, though it's probably who I mostly am now.

INTERVIEWER

Many speculated your work would never be published in your lifetime.

BRODKEY

Oh God. Publishing is a miserable procedure. Most of the reviewers are probably okay but a number of them aren't okay. I mean they don't write or think very well. And the politics, the politics of doing favors, and of being favored are hard to handle: not long ago I read an essay, I can't remember who wrote it, blaming Walter Benjamin for not being more of a politician. But the thing is, the importance of someone like Benjamin is not in his literary career, it's in his texts. It's probably not so bad a thing to publish. But I don't like it. Although maybe I'm beginning finally to like it.

INTERVIEWER

Are you afraid of being reviewed?

BRODKEY

I met Joyce Carol Oates at a book party. She said that she really envied me my silence, my not having been commented on as much as she had been. I mean, she brings out about two books a year, so she probably gets reviewed by, what, thirty-five, fifty, a hundred reviewers? Maybe she only glances at around three or four, but just seeing the headlines, just seeing all those voices, opinions. And then there are all those other opinions that do matter to her. She said she was jealous of my not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

having my head filled with others' comments, voices, opinions.

INTERVIEWER

What do you hold up as a literary ideal?

BRODKEY

Ideals are for greeting cards. I am trying to change consciousness, change language in such a way that the modes of behavior I am opposed to become unpopular, absurd, unlikely. You try to work toward a culture that takes time and conscience seriously in a real way and not as part of a tidal flow of hype.

INTERVIEWER

Is that really your belief?

BRODKEY

Yes. Be patient with me. Most of the furniture in my house comes from a period in American history called The Era of Good Feeling. A time when differences between political parties died down and there was a brief general consensus. It was a time of a certain affluence; certain kinds of happiness seemed to have been common. When I was younger I suppose I dreamed about a Periclean age in my lifetime. I don't do that anymore, but I do have the feeling that the world is in trouble and that one can do something. The something I tried to do may have been a mistake. On the other hand, I don't yet feel it was mistaken. Or let's say I hallucinate about social reality and think still that fiction affects it.

INTERVIEWER

You've portrayed yourself as being quite alone as a writer. You really don't feel a kinship with any group?

BRODKEY

Maybe the young, but clearly I don't understand the young either. I mean, I'm not young. So when it seems

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to me I understand the young, I'm probably lying to myself about it. But their sense of emergency about the world tends to match my own. Their desire for something good seems to match mine.

—James Linville

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bait & Switch

Bernardine Connelly

Chester said she was a Fish, and that wasn't good. She was sure to say no before she said yes. She had these clear, gray eyes, watery, like two little pools of clam broth. I didn't notice them at first because I was too busy wiping tomato sauce off my mouth, and popping breath mints to get rid of the garlic, and trying to remember to SCAN, which is almost like second nature to me now, but I guess my defenses go down when I'm eating. When I think about it, this has a lot to do with my mother, and I don't mean that how it sounds. It's just that when this woman, Miranda, walked in, she wasn't my up. It wasn't my turn on the rotation. But all the other guys were out at the lunch truck and I was at my desk eating the ravioli my mother had packed for me. It sounds funny, thirty-three years old, and your mother packs you a lunch—and the guys rib me about it—but I figure I'd be crazy to be spending five bucks a day on the greasy slop that Carcady makes in the back of his truck when my mother's begging me to let her do it. She enjoys it. She packs it all up every morning in those aluminum pie plates, which she's got a stack of under the sink, and there's always more than I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can eat: salad, grilled sausage, fruit, and the almond cookies she and my aunt make every Wednesday. And it's not like I'm the only one she's making lunch for. She puts a bag together every day for my father, who claims he never eats any of it, and my uncle, who's got the moods and only works on his good days, running errands for the tailor, but she packs it for him anyway, and if he's not in a bad time, he goes over to the pond in the cemetery and eats it there.

Anyway, I was crossing the showroom to meet her, shoving the paper napkin into my pocket, and trying to remember to SCAN. That's my little method. Works like a charm. *S-C-A-N:* Shake, Cough, Amputate and the seven Nos. Use it right and the SCAN gets you inside and out your customer in five minutes.

The Shake tells everything. How a man shakes his hand reveals more about him than his blood type, his tax forms, even his Christmas and Easter confessions, because the Shake doesn't lie. All I've got to do is shake my uncle's hand, morning, noon or night, and I can tell the mood he's moving into. I can tell you if he's going to come down for breakfast the next day, or if he's going to lose it, and spend the day crying over the blonde game-show girls, screaming at them, asking them whether they love him or not, and wailing his eyes out when they don't answer.

Now, there are four main Shake categories: the Fish, Flat, Pumper and Thumb. Figure out which your customer is, and you're miles ahead of the competition. First you've got your Fish shake: this is one of those limp, couldn't-give-a-damn shakes, where they're just giving you four fingers to squeeze for a second like it's a cow tit or something. Fish are the ones to watch out for. You gotta keep a real light touch on them, never push. You could give them your best shot, spend two hours, going over every gadget and bolt of the best car on the lot, and you'd get through; you're wiped out, and they just glide away, like none of it even hit them. You don't get too many Fish. I don't at least.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then there's the Flat shake. The MIT'ers, I call 'em. They're the ones that walk in with their clipboard and *Consumer Reports* articles and give you a straight flat clap of a handshake—no pump, no flesh, just click. I love these guys, because all you gotta do is play dumb. They'll sell the car for you, as long as you don't butt in or try to argue the technical stuff. The key is just to hold back and not bust in until they've got their checkbooks out. They'll be the ones telling you about the car's thermodynamic spark plugs and graphite cam shafts, and all you gotta do is do put on the cocker spaniel pose and keep shut, and they'll be nodding their heads and telling you why it's worth spending the extra twelve hundred bucks for the handling package.

Now you've got to watch out for the Pumper. This is the guy who grabs your hand like it's a pastry tube and squeezes it down the middle so your fingers go white. You've got to look this guy right in the eye. He's all ego. Get him to the nearest slick-looking two-door, even if he's looking for a station wagon, and bring him round by the mirrors. Then, whether he's a midget or the Jolly Green Giant, pull the seat way back, as if he's seven-feet tall. Look worried, and ask him if he's got enough head room, if the seat feels okay. These guys love cop cars and sports cars. But that doesn't mean they have to buy one. You just gotta start them out like that. I've got this thing going with Ray, the body shop guy. He's a Pumper himself. Every month I get him a book of car-wash coupons and a carton of pine-tree Car-Freshners. He keeps his car clean, and, whenever I get a Pumper, I bring him back to Ray's Spitfire convertible. I let them drive it, and it doesn't matter that they haven't been near a stick shift in years because they're seeing themselves racing down the Autobahn with the aviator cap and the whole deal, and by the time we get back to the lot, they're picking and choosing between the cars like it's a Whitman sampler.

Then there's the Thumb. The Thumb's where you got a chess game going. The Thumb's the guy that shakes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your hand pretty firm, but adds an extra hook with his thumb, just for a second, like he's got you in a headlock. The Thumb's ready to wear you down. He's looking for the best deal, and he's going to chisel you six ways to Sunday if you don't keep the upper hand. Thumbs are the only ones I try the hard sell on. Stick your chest out. Give them the hard glance. They're never easy, even down to the close. Damn. Try a Thumb that wants to trade in at the same time, and you've got the Superbowl Challenge. A Thumb's going to say no, five, six, seven times before he even thinks of saying yes. Say you've got the car picked out, and it's down to paper, and you think you've got him there by the jugular when you have to start talking trade-in value of a Godknowswhat, always, he says, in *mint* condition.

With a Thumb you've got to use all the tricks. Never say *buy.* Always say *own.* Never say *spend.* Always say *invest.* Never give a number first. Never. Goddam cut your tongue off before you give a number first. "How much are willing to invest, Mr. Thumb, in order to own this car?" Then hold your breath. Let the guy pace the showroom. Do what it takes, but make him come up with the first number.

Now I'm leaving some handshakes out, and I'm not going to get into the complicated stuff, like when you've got a husband and a wife, and she's the Thumb, and he's the Fish, or he's the Pumper and she's the Flat. That's not as tricky as it sounds. Men, women—I give them the method, and it works. Except for Miranda, but it works.

The SCAN pretty much breaks down when I go over to her. Like I was saying, my defenses were down, and I just all of a sudden notice her knees, or not her knees exactly, but how her skirt hit exactly at her knees, and I started noticing her skirt because it was almost like a uniform, real plain, perfectly straight and tan, and it ripples only when she moves, and that's what's getting me because it's like watching the surface of a lake or something. This skirt goes from being a straight piece of nothing while she stands still to being all curves and motion.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now I'm not your weird kind of guy, but watching her, she might as well be naked, or better than naked because all I can see are these two thighs swishing together, making the ripples. And I can see right where the hem meets her knees and her nylons are almost the exact same color as the skirt, and they ripple too, right after she bends her knee; and when I think about it, I can't believe how I'm taking it all in, how much I'm staring, like I'm filming it in my brain. I can even see the way it's all so plain, the tan skirt, the nylons, and a no-frills white blouse, probably no different from something one of the secretaries would wear, but I'm staring. And I know I'm staring at it, and the more I'm staring at it, the more I can't pull my eyes off it, and I keep thinking what a weird guy I'm being because I don't get into stuff like that. I don't even get into the magazine stuff. And by the time I get over to her, I'm just straight embarrassed and half-forgetting where I am, like it's been an hour since she's even walked in. And it's true what they say, that the key to good salesmanship is to stay in control, stay cool, and there, from the very start, I am neither.

And the point of all this is that I don't even shake her hand. I don't even have that on her. All I've got is this skirt fix. And tomato sauce that I'm trying nonchalantly to lick out of the corners of my mouth. And she comes right up to me, and I'm starting to notice that she's got all these other parts to her body, like arms and feet, and she's got this big shoulder purse like you don't see too many ladies carrying anymore. She says, "Mr. Igo, how much for that Trans Am?" And that's a pretty strange way to put it since the sticker is pasted all over the passenger window, and she hasn't even really stopped to look at it. So, I'm starting to think she's just kind of weird, and I'm still deciding whether I should even shake her hand at this point, even though she's already read my name off my desk plate. And that's when Chester saves me.

Chester's the floor manager. He decides what the cars go for and takes it upon himself to make sure we sweat each close down to the last nickel. He gets pleasure out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of it, working the trade-ins for half the Blue Book quote, pretending he's not going to budge off the sticker price for some puke-colored wonder that's been sitting on the lot for six months. Most of the guys spend at least half their waking hours bitching about Chester, about how they'd be making $50*K* if Chester didn't keep giving them such low bids, but even saying it, they know it isn't true. You don't see any of them moving to other dealerships. The one thing you can't say about Chester is that he's not on top of things. He holds onto that floor like a junkyard dog. And there's no reasoning with him if you don't make the sale. Here's a guy that cruises the strip searching down the cheapest gas prices, but damned if he understands that customers might want to do some comparative shopping. No. Chester doesn't see any relationship between the two things. He sees each up like some kind of salmon just waiting to get plucked out of the water. And I can't disagree with him.

I don't bitch about him. He rides me as hard as any of the others, harder even, because he's known me since I was born. He's the only one from the old neighborhood who still visits my uncle. And he never says a thing about it. He just stops by, every couple of weeks, and goes straight to his door, which no one ever does, not even the mailman. They always stop first at my mother's and screen her for what kind of shape he's in. And most of the time, she calls my uncle down to our house from the attic apartment, as if he'd been banished up there for bad behavior.

When Chester catches me in my Bozo routine with Miranda, he does what he never does. He actually leaves his corner, his domain, with the lucite manager's plaque, the brass eagle and American flag lined up along the counter, and lugs over the entire register book, podium and all. He says he can tell looking at her that she's a Fish. Now this isn't like Chester. Chester isn't the type of guy to wade out and throw you a rope. None of that. Yet here he is trying to give me a reprieve for a second. And she has none of it. She just shifts her weight for a second

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and says, "Hi, I'm on my lunch. I just want to know how much the Trans Am is going for."

And Chester gives it a shot: "Which Trans Am is it you're interested in? Chuck Igo here is one of our finest sales representatives and if you'd just sign our guest register, he'd be glad to show you any one you want." Now Chester never forgets to rub it in that before his days of being the almighty floor manager he'd sold everything from Stutzes to wrecks. His love is the used car lot, and every once in a while he just gets itchy and takes a particularly knotty-looking up, and every time that up'll walk out of there with a used car, priced to the nines. But she doesn't say anything, and for a second I'm thinking maybe she's foreign. She just looks at him, and he's starting to look stupid holding up the podium like he's some kind of altar boy.

I walk her over to the Trans Am, but nothing's working, none of the sales hooks, not even when I misquote the sticker price and ask her if that's the kind of investment she wants to make. She just looks at me blank, with this flat chalkboard stare. And I'm trying to tell myself, "Fish, Igo, Fish," but nothing clicks, so I go for some yes or no answers, and say, "Well, you want to ride one?" and what does she do but get into the one sitting there on the floor, even though there are half a dozen carbon copy models out in the lot. And somehow, with her sitting there, it all just makes perfect sense. We'll take the floor model. And all the guys end up putting down their lunches and racing around the showroom, tapping the other cars into corners, unbuckling the hinges on the front glass doors, picking up plants, letting the phone ring. All of this like we do it every day. For every up. And Chester himself, back in his corner, orchestrating the whole thing, telling the guys what to do.

Having the customer drive creates this sense of obligation on his part, like he's got something at stake, like he's borrowed your car. That doesn't happen with Miranda. What happens with Miranda is she says nothing, and I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pull out of the lot, looking in my rear view mirror to see the guys trying to put the showroom back together again, and I take the usual test drive route, over a few potholes to shake her up a bit, pushing it past sixty, up and down the hills, and taking it down to this industrial park, thinking that maybe we'll turn around, and she'll want to take the wheel. But I look over and she's making like she's asleep. It's eerie looking because the seat's up pretty straight, so it's not like she's conked out. She's just sitting there perfectly still with her neck bent back slightly and her eyes sealed shut. I've been sitting right next to her, trying to liven her up, waving my hands, asking her questions and looking over her way, so it's not like she could have been out for a while. And that's when I'm thinking I've got a psycho on my hands, and suddenly I'm looking at her shoulder purse, and I'm seeing all sorts of handguns and switchblades jangling around in there, and I can even start to hear whatever the noise would be if there were guns and switchblades inside, and I find myself looking at her skirt again, which every time I look over seems to be rippled one ripple higher up her thighs, and I'm looking at those pantyhose, and I'm imagining everything, and just when I'm starting to get pissed off at myself for even putting myself in this situation, what does she do but sit up like a daisy and ask to drive. Screech. Rubber on the gravel. Sure, baby. And I keep the purse on my side.

She heads down to the plastics factory. Now, where I've turned in, where the test-drive route goes, is an attractive place. It's a real state-of-the-art industrial park with landscaping and tinted windows, and the people look pretty happy that come out of there. They're putting together computers and missile parts, nothing too sweaty. That's why we even bring the customers down—the cars look good there, like they're parked beside some architect's model. But that's not the way she'd have it. She brings the car down this gravel road to the plastics factory, which before it made plastics made Godknows-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what chemical shit that the town keeps finding pools of every time they dig a new sewer line. The plastics factory is the kind of place that used to be all over town, hidden behind the main drag, before high tech came in and before the river got so polluted that no one even considered it a river anymore. More like a cesspool. The factory is blocks long and gray with row after row of windows so dirty that they look like they're covered with smoke. You know no sun gets in there. And from the outside all you can see is the throb of the fluorescent lights.

Miranda stops the car just before we get to the factory, and we switch places again like we're about to drive back, but we both end up sitting there, with the engine running, looking down at the factory like it's some UFO or something, and I'm completely forgetting about the car, about everything, because I'm thinking about nothing just so I won't think about my uncle, and won't think about him, my age, walking in there, lunch pail in hand, day after day for ten years. I do not think about that. And I'm sitting there next to this semi-psycho. And she kisses me. And I think, "I didn't expect that." But I did.

She kisses me, and it becomes pretty clear that perfecting the art of kissing is not what she has in mind. It's that skirt again. I've barely got my foot off the brake pedal and she's somehow got the skirt around her waist, and it's like she's not seeing that there's a built-in-the-USA gear box and semi-lethal stick shift coming between us. And I should be fighting back all the bouts of conscience you're supposed to go through at a time like this, but there weren't any. This was just a damn challenge, and I wanted to see how this woman was going to turn a perfectly new low rider with bucket seats and head room for a pygmy into a love suite at the Poconos. She's not even glancing at the back seat; she's just heading over my way, and my only contribution is having the wherewithal to nudge the tilt-wheel knob and give her a few more inches of breathing room.

Why no bouts of conscience? It's not like I'm a married guy. I'm a bachelor, and I consider myself a bach. It's not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like I'm looking for a wife, or even need a wife. If I take a woman out, I treat her right, and sometimes in between, this sort of thing comes up. I don't have a problem with it.

It's not until I skin my knee under the dash that I even decide to take an active role, and it's amazing what you can do if you put your mind to it. I've never gone for the sex-with-the-clothes-on routine. It's too much like peeing, and it reminds me of the people that do it between holes in the sheets over in the Middle East. I think that's what she wanted, sort of an economy run, because she looks surprised when I slow it down and loosen the buttons on her cuffs, one by one, and slip her nylons into the glove compartment so they won't get torn. And piece by piece, as we finally fit our anatomies into GM's model of ergodynamics, we make it right there, hip bones to the steering wheel, and I've got to tell you: it's nice, as nice as it's ever been, as nice as I ever expect it to be. And by the time we both come, it's like a good joke; it's over before we told it, and I'm trying to think of ways to make it last and to make the come-spot on the upholstery a new selling feature of the car.

And she leaves. She just gets out and dresses on the gravel, as comfortable as Eve in Eden, as if the last place she is, is just outside a plastics factory with two thousand bored, sweaty workers wondering whether they're seeing a vision, if they can see out at all. And as she walks away, down towards the factory, it's not like this big ending. She just kind of skips over the gravel, her purse bouncing off her hip, and gives me a little wave. That's it, and I don't see her until the next day.

This is the day we make it in a maroon Grand Prix that she picks off the back lot. Velour interior. Electric seats. Passenger side mirror. The details are nice. I can't remember what she's wearing. Pants, I think. And I can't remember how she even shows up again, except it's right there with the lunch truck, and Chester doesn't say a damn thing, and none of the guys say a damn thing, even as I grab for the can of new-car spray on the way out. And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I can't remember a hell of a lot else, except the cars. I remember the cars, because we make it every day after that, except Sundays, for three weeks, and because before I even start thinking about it, I can feel how it felt, and I can feel how each time it's like I suddenly understand where the heart muscle is and how it's going at it, day and night, pumping the blood out like an engine and forcing it down to your fingertips and doing this little backflip up and around the brain and even wasting time in places like your armpits and the backs of your knees. And that's what I keep feeling, I keep feeling the blood pumping out of my heart, and I can see this diagram of my body like it's in a biology book, with all the veins and capillaries outlined in blue, except the blood's warm, and everywhere it goes, it's warm. I can still feel that, just thinking about it.

The Shake is crucial to get the initial take on a person, but there's still the C-A-N: Cough, Amputate and the seven Nos. The way I remember is Cough-Compassion. C-C. When I was around nine, I saw my grandmother nearly choke to death on an undercooked pea at Thanksgiving dinner. I remember sitting there watching her turn red, which with her Sicilian skin, made her look like the turkey itself, and she was flailing her arms around, while my mother's pounding her on the back, and nothing's working, and my uncle even gets the idea to stick a fork down her throat, even though my grandmother going through the dry heaves just trying to breathe, and that's when she lost it and stood up, batting both of them away, and she gripped the edge of the table with her two hands and in a single cough managed to shoot that pea right across the room like it was out of a cannon. And, since I've been nine, I've been doing an imitation of that cough at every dinner and holiday, or whenever my uncle is in one of his down moods and I have to do the cough to get him to laugh.

Of course I've had to refine it for the customers, but it's still the Cough. I want them to think just for a half-second that I just may be about to keel over. And it's a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

real teller to see how people react. The other guys are used to it by now, so no one in the showroom cares, and it tells a lot about the client to see if they're the type that runs to someone else, in which case, they're not likely to see the worldview, and you've got to keep your pitch pretty dry, or if they'll just lean over and keep asking you if you're all right, in which case they're probably just dense, which is just as bad, or if they actually reach out and slap you on the back, in which case you're cruising, and that customer is going to understand that the experience of buying that car is going to compare with any other of life's monumental moments like getting married, having a kid, dying. And with the Cough (and this has only happened once), if they're worldview-enough to try the Heimlich maneuver on you, you know the bond's been made, and they'll be picking out key chains in a minute. I never try the Cough on Miranda. It never occurs to me.

When you've got through the Cough, it's the *a* in SCAN that comes through in closing, when you're ready to sign the papers. *A*—Amputate. If you're going through the SCAN, and you've got a read on the Cough, it's real easy to find your own guard down, and find yourself more the customer than the salesman. What I'm saying is, salesmanship is a very social art, but you've got to remember that that's not the point, that you're not there for a coffee klatch, and the best way I have to do this is with Amputate. All too often, your mind starts twisting like his, and you're trying to imagine how he's going to afford to buy the late model sports car when he's got child support and a thousand other things to pay. And that's where Amputate comes in—the second you feel yourself warping into the customer's mindset is when you've got to amputate. All you do is visualize those two arms that were so important in the Shake, joined together, and you just lop them off. Sounds crazy, but you just watch them drop down to the showroom floor, and you'll feel right back in position. Now, I'm telling you, it really works, and if you've got an especially hard case,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and this happens to me a lot if it's some guy with a hard-luck story, or some guy that I supposedly knew from grade school. But you've still just got to lop it off, and if you have to, visualize the other arms—have them join in a shake, and just lop them off, and you can keep going with the legs. And I'll tell you, I've had some tough ones, the kind where I'm ready to sacrifice the commission just to get this guy into a car, and I've had to keep cutting and cutting, limb after limb, just until I get my bearings. But, if you use it right, it works.

I guess it's about the third week when we have to dip into the used-car lot for cars. We've been through the new models, even if we haven't tried every version, or color combination, and the first car Miranda picks out is this used Grand Safari station wagon, navy blue with the fake wood paneling and whitewalls, gray interior. Nice car, and it's rare to find the family that parts with its station wagon. But by then I've started to feel a little peeved about the whole set-up. Chester had come by the house that weekend, and my uncle was pretty off. He wasn't even yelling at the TV. He just keeps to his bed. My father's on the graveyard shift on the subway, and my mother ends up bringing trays of food upstairs every few hours, and by the time Chester gets there, my uncle's talking ragtime, cursing his mother, spitting up like a baby, shitting in the bed. Chester doesn't say a thing to me, but he stays for tea with my mother, and that gets to me. It's something she's always offered, and he's never taken her up on, and he's trying to tell me something, and all I can think of as I watch the two of them dipping their almond cookies into the tea, my mother looking bone-tired, is of Miranda's skirt the first day, and the way it rippled.

I'm feeling pretty used, not even knowing her last name or where she lives or whether, as I imagine, she even works in the factory. We don't talk, yet I feel like she has me, like I've given her as much as I've given any woman, and it's not going to add up to shit. Before we take out the Grand Safari, there's the time when she'd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shown up, walked right past my desk and gone straight to Ray's car, the Spitfire, as if she knows my whole routine. And we take it out, top down, as smooth as it comes, the entire ride smelling of Car-Freshner, and she undresses on the way, pothole by pothole, not giving a damn about the cars going by, and by the time we get to the spot, I'm ready to make it with my clothes on, and she's the one slowing me down, playing and teasing, even heating the medals around my neck between her hands. And we pull the top down and open the side doors, and we're revelling in all the elbow room, when, just at the final hour, just when I'm letting go, the bucket seat pops off its runners, and I slam down on her, and without thinking about it I started shouting lines I had to memorize in tenth grade: "O heavy lightness! Serious vanity! Feather of lead, bright smoke, sick health." And she's laughing and making like she's some kind of accident victim with her head hanging out the side door. And I leave the seat just as it is, piled in the back like cargo, and I drive back with my butt in the air, sitting on this invisible chair. But by the day in the Grand Safari that feeling's gone.

Two minutes in the Grand Safari and she says, "Let's go to the river," like she's been thinking about it, and we drive past the industrial park, past our regular spot, past the plastics factory and down this little mud road, until we can't go any further, and that's fine with me, because you can just see the river if you look between some of the thinner trees, and it's no river to look at. It's murky and gray and spends all its efforts carrying along chewed-up garbage and dead fish, and when the sun hits it, you can see these little rainbow slicks of Godknowswhat dotted all along the top like sores. But she wants to go down to the edge even though we've come as close as we're ever going to, to having a king-size bed right there with the wagon, but all I care about is being able to go back to work clean, without mud all over me. So we undress right there in the car, and Miranda is now in the habit of putting everything short of her shoes into the glove com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

partment and laughing about it, like that's what glove compartments are made for, and she has a certain twinkle to her that day that I haven't seen before, and something in me wants to just meet her all over again, like in a park, or at a zoo.

The ground is damp, or cold enough to feel damp, but she shoots straight for a spot by the bank where the water keeps hitting up against a rock and each time it makes this little yellow brown surf, and I guess if you imagine hard enough you could pretend you've gone out to the shore. I'm still pretty annoyed and am thinking of saying something, so I keep pinching her and pulling at her to try and get her to lie down, but she's hyper or something, and keeps jumping around, messing up my hair and picking weeds out of the ground, and it's not until I sit perfectly still on this rock that she even comes over, and she gives me this look, like this real Thumb look, and I'm getting ticked off, and she just goes into overdrive, as if up until now she's been caged in these cars, but now she's really going to show her stuff. And we end up like a pair of squirrels, running all over the place, and I can barely keep up with her and am just relieved when she finally tackles me down, and, on the way, I catch my eye on these perfectly pure white clouds of smoke shooting up from the plastics factory. And everything slows down, and she keeps watching them and moves on top of me, gliding with the clouds, and for a second I really believe I'm at the shore, with the tide going out, because we're making it real slow, and the smoke keeps floating over, white white against the sky, and the water's just gurgling, like it's far away, and that's when I want to see her eyes, and when I look up, I see we're both smeared with mud, and she has it on her face like some kind of orphan girl, so her eyes looked especially gray, and I just have to get it off me, and she waits, watching me as I dash into the river like a dog and splash water wherever I can stand it, and I'm freezing, shaking myself off, grabbing leaves, and I just want to get back in her like I was, but when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I try, all I can smell is the river and the factory, and it's all over me, and the back of my throat keeps idling like it wants to gag, and I can't even get hard, and I just want to wipe it all off on her, and the more I smell it, the more I can see the factory, and I watch myself walking out among a crowd of workers, lunch pail in hand, and I'm made of plastic, clear, white, hard plastic, and my lunch pail and hat and overalls are all plastic, and I can taste the river in the my mouth, so I start kissing her hard, and she gets a little scared because I'm sucking the saliva from under her tongue, just to taste it, just to taste her, and I can tell I'm freaking out because even the smoke clouds start to scare me, and I imagine them raining down on us like in some kind of sci-fi flick, and I imagine myself moving into my uncle's attic apartment, and I can see myself carrying the furniture up the stairs, and I'm carrying this huge chair, and I can't make it up the stairs, the stairs are too narrow, and I hear myself screaming to her, "Lick it off. Please lick it off." And she even tries to, and all I can see is this woman with dirt all over her face, and I really hate her, and I think, "Igo—Amputate, Amputate!" and I throw her off me and say, "You going to buy the fucking car or what?"

I clean up in the men's room before I go back on the floor, and I swear I don't know how he sees me, but Chester walks in like he knows I'm there, and passes me the after shave he keeps at his counter, but with this real stern look, and I slap it on and pop a half-dozen breath mints into my mouth until I can feel the spearmint coming out of my nose, and it's like nothing ever happened.

The final leg to the SCAN is simple. The seven Nos. *N* is for no, and there's a tried and fast rule in the business that a customer's no isn't the real No until the seventh. Anything before that is a stall. And this isn't my rule. This is from the books, and you can try it on anyone. Have your kids try it selling Girl Scout Cookies. They're shaking their head on the sixth No, and—boom—the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seventh one comes out, and what do you know, it's a yes.

Chester's pretty edgy that afternoon, breathing down everyone's neck, having them make cold calls and come up with the names of fifteen relatives that might buy new cars. And no one is coming in, and we know, hell or high water, he's going to take the next up and pummel them into a car. And just after it's starting to get dark, he's making a beeline out of the showroom onto the lot, and he's right at this couple looking at the Grand Safari wagon, and I'm wondering if I got the smell out of the car, and it doesn't take me too long to see it's Miranda, and she's got this long raincoat on, and she's shaking Chester's hand like she's never seen him before, and the guy with her is looking like one of these straight-on types, a Flat, for sure, and I'm just watching, and it doesn't take much to see it's he's not exactly her brother, the way the two of them sort of sway back and forth towards each other as they're standing there, and none of the guys says a thing even though we're all watching like it's some kind of event, and all I keep wondering is why I never drove anywhere else with her, why I always took her on the test drive, and why I never asked her anything, never asked her to a movie, never asked her to lunch, never took her to the shore, never asked her, her age, and I guess it's the same reason why I don't even care when I see Chester come back for the keys so they can take it down to the industrial park, and the same reason I start putting together the finance papers on the Grand Safari, saving Chester the effort, and it's the same reason I never go up to my uncle's apartment without my mother, and most of the time I just wait for her to call him down.

"Did you love me?"

"No."

"No."

"No."

"No."

"No."

"No."

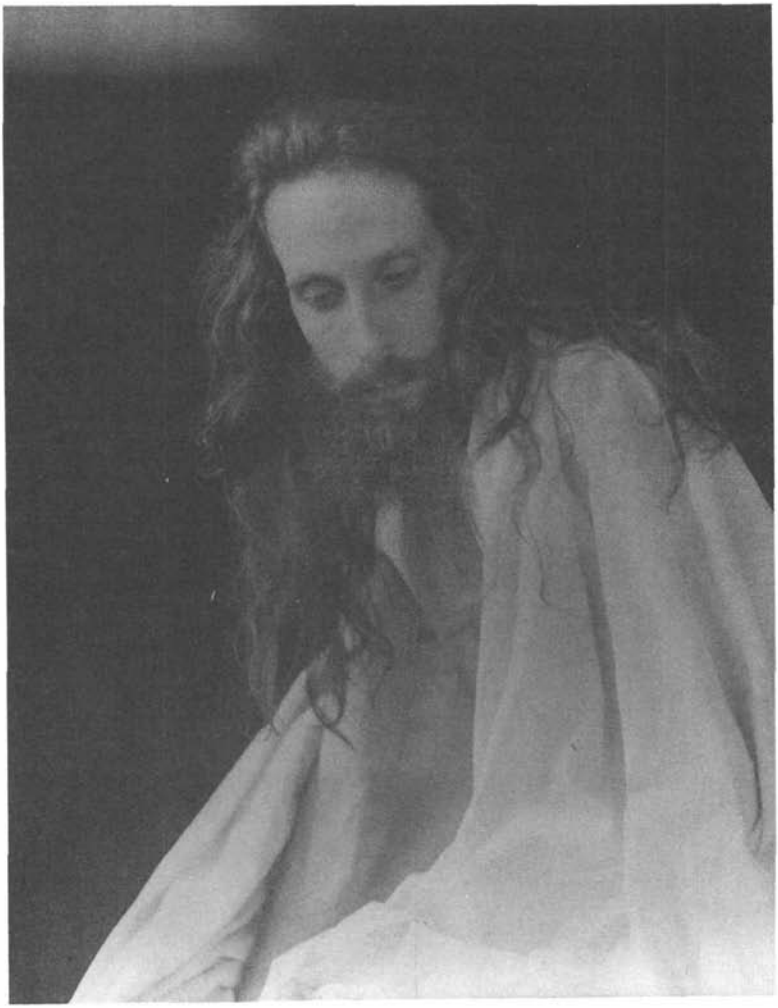
"Did you love me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Portraits

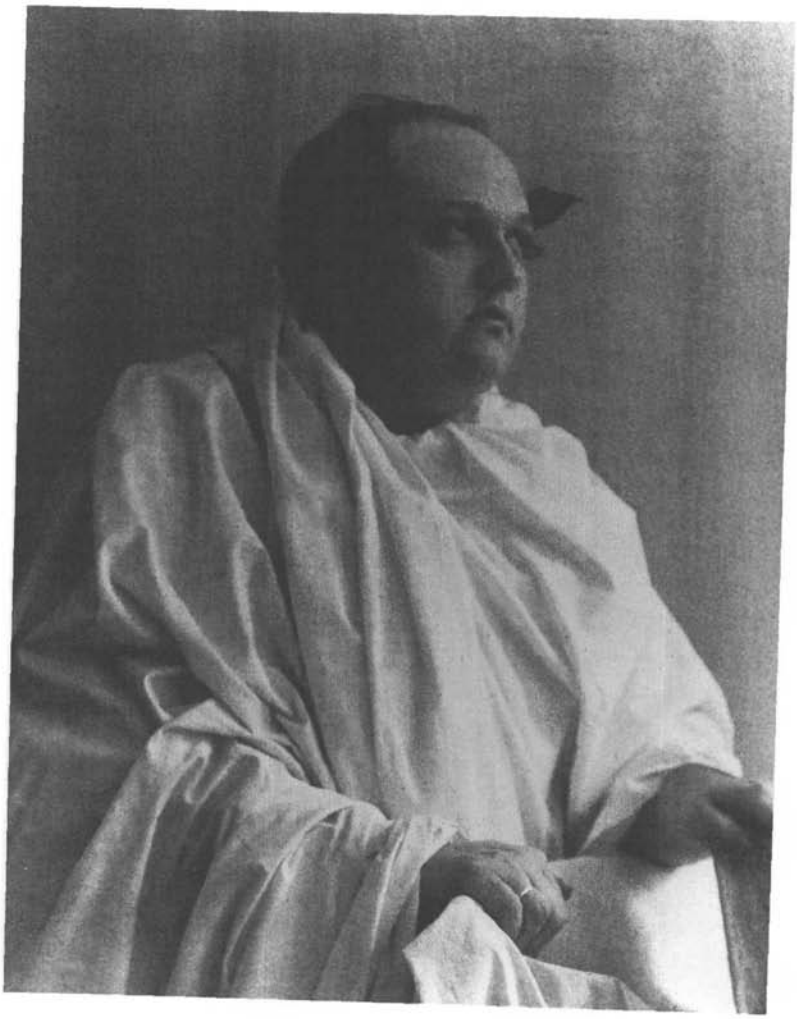
David McDermott
and
Peter McGough

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



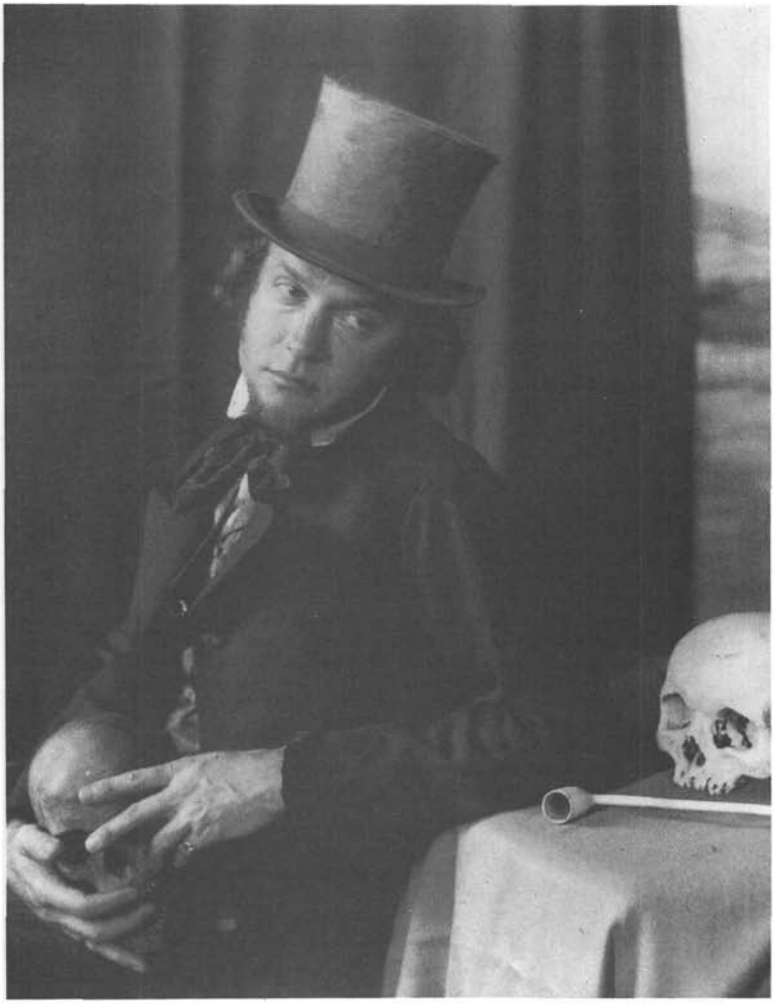
St. Jerome, 1904

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



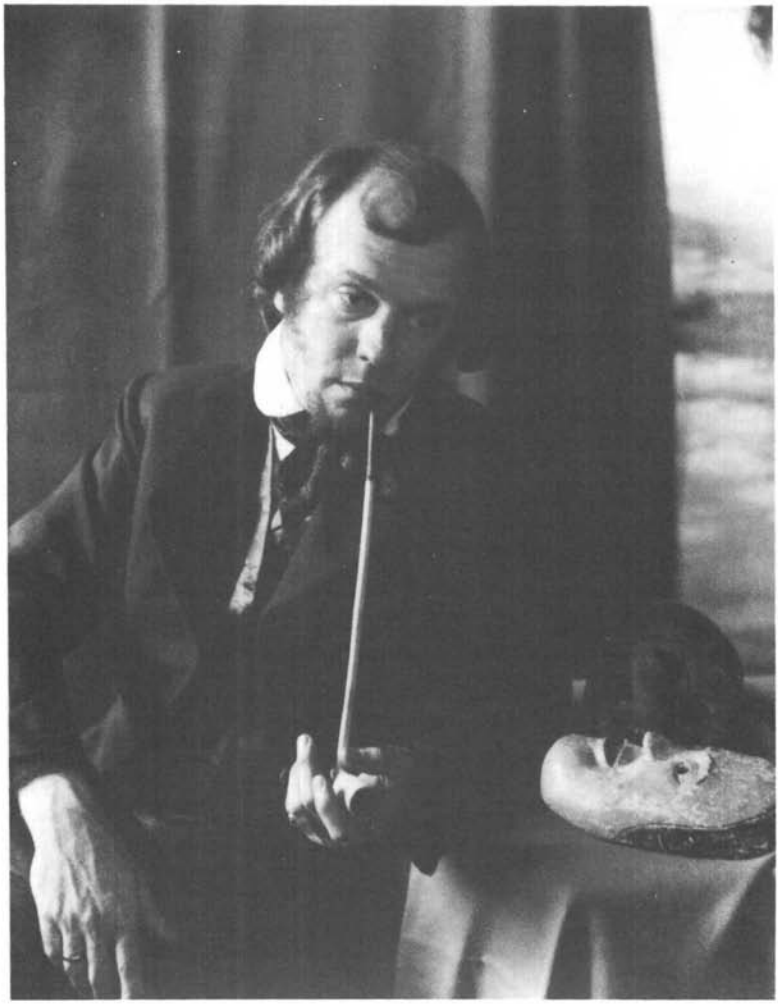
Portrait of Critic as Emperor, 1907

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Portrait of Ricky Clifton with Skulls, 1856

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Portrait of Ricky Clifton with Pipe, 1856

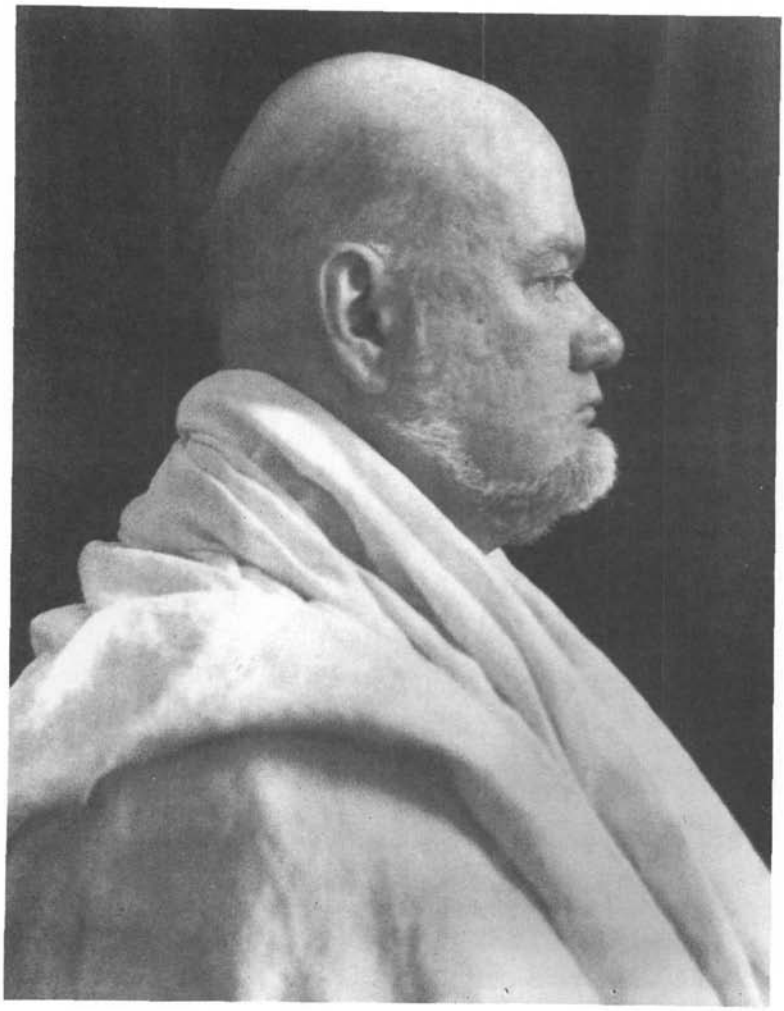
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Portrait of Ezra Mack
in His Booth at the Fair, 1898

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Howard Read in Profile, 1904

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Profile of Harry Lunn, 1858

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Invocation, 1907

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Daryl Hine

In Place

The obverse of the sanguinary Turkey
Carpet I figured I was looking for,
Festooned with geometric shapes in murky
Purples and blues, adorns my study floor,

An oriental compromise whose primrose
Yellow pallor emphasizes its
Celestial centerpiece. Around the rim, rose
And turquoise ramifications ramp. It fits

Fantastically the space which it was bought
For, and the luxury I thought I needed,
Like all appetites' lost absolutes,
Must be obliterated soon by what
I never could imagine, superseded
By the pale reality that suits.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Georgi Belev

The Forest Comes Down at Night

The forest comes down at night. She waits until the last tram has left, then sets off. She meets the drunks—with eyes half-shut they pass through her, they stumble but don't curse. The forest walks steadily on. Like children at recess the houses scatter in twos and threes, tossing us, slippered and pajama'd, into the branches. Where are the streets? They've flowed away beneath the leaves and moss. The telephone wires, the whizzing of cars? Now they're clogging only dreams. And the shopfronts? They've gone elsewhere in search of passersby.

The forest looks around, then stops. Vast and calm, she gently brushes clouds from her forehead, they keep returning . . . The stillness is perfect, as if someone had just sighed. The forest is alone, standing like a widow above a picture album. She waits. The drunks are gone, having left some of their wine still undrunk, part of their song still unsung. The wine? . . . Overhead, ruddy-nosed clouds are whispering tipsily. Abruptly the forest heads off, without looking back. And the first tram-whistle makes the houses line up again.

—translated from the Bulgarian
by Lisa Sapinkopf with the author

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by April Bernard

Psalm:
It Must Be the Medication

So the hip rises, oh so slightly, in its golden socket
and music continues despite the dawn

The lion threw his head back and sang two notes like
a veery

Everywhere doubling, two acid drops on sugar,
two boiling drops on ice, close your eyes

And memory sound as a wooden bucket, more sound

Why fuss with innuendo, when
gold and russet fruit lies across the forest floor?

Here, the loon's vocal cascade, absolute,
for the moment without remove, write, "I can't stop
laughing"

Psalm:
Cris de Coeur

Help (for which we have cried since morning)
Help (remember how fingers bled raw)
Help (you must remember actual pain)
Help (lest our enemies call us unfeeling)
Help (give me your hand)
Help (kiss me, there, where stiff lips part)
Help (always asked, always found)
Help (offered while the head turns away, the
negligent hand)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Help (you are hurting me)
Help (you are not hurting me)
Help (sunlight! turn off the sunlight!)
Help (which is never offered and never sought)
Help (given to those who need it not)
Help (offered from one recumbent in the ditch)
Help (it is coming, it is coming)
Help (like a wave, a hiccup, a fuck)
Help (a break in the clouds)
Help (the gypsy head cupped against the small of my back)
Help (it is out of tune again)
Help (drumming)
Help (a snare drum, continuous)
Help (give me some)
Help (remember that I once gave)
Help (or the next best thing)
Help (the chorus of street dogs at my window)
Help (the hand detached like a mannequin's)
Help (there is soap in my eye)
Help (that child is drowning)
Help (I can't turn this thing off)
Help (where did you put it)
Help (hold me)
Help (scrape the snow from my forehead)
Help (if we all just hold hands for a moment, then it will be possible)
Help (there's a gorilla in my boots)
Help (there is mustard on your face)
Help (the telephone is my enemy)
Help (someone else first)
Help (over my dead body)
Help (without being asked)
Help (for the night is coming)
Help (I have a puncture)
Help (who can)
Help (who will)
Help (for which my heart has cried since morning)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Len Roberts

Learning the Planets

The planets whirled across the blackboard all
morning,
Saturn with its twelve rings, Jupiter with its belts,
red Mars, green Venus, the familiar blue Earth
where we sat in that eighth-grade class learning light
years, 8 light minutes for the sun's rays to touch my
arm,
Alpha Centauri 4.4 light years away,
Betelgeuse, the giant red star in Orion's shoulder,
300,
Rigel, the blue giant in Orion's knee, 540,
the vastness of blackness suddenly ours
while Richie Reese picked his nose
and lovely Karen Awlen hitched up her dress. Infinity
and eternity
blurred by the sun in dull yellow chalk
as I felt the pull of the planets and their moons
hold me in my desk where carved hearts orbited
with the names of those I did not know, Jimmy loves
Sue,
Tina and Barry circled by a ring of smoke drifting
up from a speeding Chevy, I Love My Dog, Snookie,
etched in small, straight lines by the inkwell. 1944,
1946, 1950, 53, 56,
each year trailed names the way Halley's
comet trailed light that October morning,
and I carved Lorraine, 1958, with a crescent moon
cupping it
while Sister Angelica told us Copernicus knew the
Earth was a wanderer,
Galileo the first to see the phases of Venus, sunspots,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

telling us about the Black Hole that sucked all light
into it,
spreading her black-winged arms and wrapping
Margaret Blake
to show her what it was like, unfolding Margaret's
chalk-white face
when she began to cry, the face that would begin to
glow white
in a few years and then fade, cancer of the lungs they
said
but we all knew it was the blackness she saw back in
that class,
blackness revolving in Sister's heart,
blackness of distances we could not even imagine,
blackness we heard even then in Margaret's sobs
while cosmic
clouds floated on the board with the label, "raw
material of creation,"
where stars were born and died,
and planets whirled on their inevitable paths.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lucy Grealy

Ward 10

Nothing melodramatic, it's just when the sunlight
came in through the wired windows and laid itself
down on the green floor, it was nice, we liked it
there, then, playing our games. And like kids
anywhere, we were bad, always sneaking off
to buy chocolate in the lobby, over to Maternity
to make faces at babies, and one morning,
after a previous evening of hushed, excited planning
based on an overheard conversation,
we took the elevator all the way down to the lower
basement
to wind our way through the deserted tunnels linking
buildings,
nervous, fearless explorers among the bare floodlights
and echoes, looking for signs pointing
toward the animal labs. The night before
we'd lain in our beds unable to sleep with the image
of what we must have thought would be
some sort of petting zoo. We got giggly lost three
times
before the stink of sheep's pee found us,
and then we found them, bleating in their concrete
strawless pens, raw geometrics shaved
in their sides. In the next room were cages
and cages of cats, most of them silent, some
with electrodes sewn in their heads.
We could hear monkeys nearby, but instead chose
to finally read the signs we'd laughed at minutes
before:
we *were* unauthorized personnel, we weren't
supposed to be there. We went back to the ward

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to find the nurses laughing, scolding.
They thought we'd somehow found out
the hated technician who took blood
was coming that morning, and that we'd sneaked off
to buy Hershey bars in the gift shop instead.
Always loving, they applauded our ingenuity:
"How did you know?" We hadn't, but
played along anyway.
"Guess," we told them.

*

Before I knew high school I knew words
like vincristine, cytotoxin, sarcoma, failing.
I understood the basic theory of radiation,
the vacuum principle of hypodermics,
that it would be a long time
before I would say out loud
the names of my friends again.

Listen, Michael, Tina: I'm the one who made it.
I don't know the reason for this.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stephen Sandy

Great Plains Dooryard

Here bricks are so rare they are like agates
We wonder who would carry them so far
Here I feel good because I have nothing
I am thinking about
Or that anyone would steal
I have no status but this doesn't matter
It matters that no one can tell me why though.

When I walk home to the plain board parlor
I am content that someone I love
Needs to be cared for or nursed for a long time
And the bricks piled by the door are like cocoons
Each one bends a little
Arches ever so slightly.

She is already in the room and safe
Though there was no buggy not even a horse
It is a strange light she brings me
A kind of sodium splendor over the barnish dark
All manner of things will be well
But I must not care how it appears.

Once bricks were everywhere
In the sky and underfoot
That was grandfather's world
They were legion they were unnoticed
Thinking about a brick was like trying to know death
But here they are so rare they are like agates
We wonder what carried them so far.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Anthony Robbins

Destroyers

I

Faring
and with a full tank:
past death regardless
and into death pointless. Peopled, yes.
Some on the top. Some in the belly,
the belly night.
Past the murdering
elements diminishing
by fortuity and into the carnival
of intended gurry.
Some on the top night.
Some in the belly, racked
there as in the clay
niches of the actual and now
sepulchral warrens of the saints

There are dim red lamps along the steel labyrinths.
Incense pots empty for two thousand years.
And an empty rack where Howard, a ship's fireman,
lately made photos of his hard cock
to send them home
to Marie:
past death
and into death, peopled with a sense
of passing along. More of us or less,
how we measure the carelessness
of the waves.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

II

In a small long boat
far at sea. Mast broken and the sun is cold.
And Etheridge at the prow
his jaw encased with ice.
And turning, are turned away by
premonitions daily:
a hacked joint hovers
in the air and we saw it. Pearly
gristle on and off in the fog
and a boot slopping with blood. And we turned away
from Foyroydar. We bore back
toward Hofn.
And there she came down
the hill on a long finger of ice
that reached through the emerald grass.
She slid down to us
on her belly
bringing fishes, bread, and a silver liquor.
She bade us take our knives and we did
and she told us we could and we ate
our own flesh. It came off
of our arms like a paste.
And no pain. And she clothed us.
And I got a pair of black pants,
a band of emerald green at the waist.

III

There Were Two Bags of Trash

The ship was being watched. So Howard shat
in one bag for the spy ship that dogged us
and stuck in a note, "Eat this shit, Ivan."
And it lay for a while in a corner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the officers' mess where Howard worked
while the men meantime had to suit up
and go out in the storm to man the main
deck starboard aft fuel port. Cold waves roared
over the deck and Howard hooked his life-
line to the cable. The oiler steaming
alongside fired over a line attached
to the hose that Howard fastened and held
tight as the waves poured over the main deck,
as the ship rolled, as her belly got filled.
And then he started below to his rack.
And then Howard was stopped by Ensign
Jones, who ordered him and Candelario,
the mail clerk, to get the hell rid of those
two bags of trash. We all thought that the storm
was dying a little, just a little,
and they might have gone to a hatch and heaved
them
overboard. Sideways. They should have done that.
But Howard and Candelario went
for once in their fucking lives by the book
and walked all the way astern on the low
fantail of our destroyer. Howard
heaved his document out into the foam,
then Candelario. The waves were coming
in sets. As they got back to the hatch a wave,
tons of water, *Teufelwasser,* said Koth,
who we told to shut up, hit the starboard
side of the ship. Candelario was washed
inside. Howard was behind. The wave ripped up
the steel wall that shielded the fire station,
and the wall flattened Howard there against
the bulkhead. And Hannan and Smith saw him
and went down and pried him loose and got mangled
too in the ladder in another hit.
Five hundred on board but the ship had no
corpsman. The carrier was far away.
And the storm burgeoned back, or we had sailed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back into it. That day we were somewhere
north of the Azores, Howard's note somewhere
on the water. We found his last letter
on his rack, and we mailed it home to Marie.

IV

From a padded shelf in the guts of the ship
where he lay, where he lay, he arose
and crept down the close corridors
in the belly, in the belly. And no one
seemed to notice, and he went up where
by rule, the rules, he should not be—
into the signal shack at sunset.
To the NNW
a city writhed on the side of a hill,
and east, in back of him, Calabria.
A river of gold
ran up to the ship. The signal chief held
out a pack of code cards. He drew a card.
Whiskey. Light
coming in a million scimitars in the gold
and orange and blue. He drew. *Juliet.*
He drew. *Five.* In the heart
of the river each flashing blade
trailed flakes of sight. *Quebec. Third*
substitute. Pennant two. The densest
part of the river was pure, it was itself sight, and
there, there for a second
X-ray, Admiral, she clotted and hovered
on and part of the river. She rode. *India. Six.*
And then she disappeared.

V

Flags aplenty and a magazine
of cut-rate carte blanche letters of marque:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

part of the condition of being
shocked by the usual, meanwhile
coldly facing
the rendering of same. Situation interstitial,
a hopeless bind, a vise, a pinch, a time
to stop trying
to save them, to save only self, to lay in a stock
of darkness
for the coming difficulties

Some tell of a pinnacle.
Others imply a continuum, and some
say therein a point
of subsidence short
of death. From the way his holders retched
and how he bled I think
of nothing, naught, he never had a chance

no
not
naught
naughtical
no one knows
we fail in our coracle
some on the top
some in the belly night

Time was. We welled in the sea.
Then the frigate went in
and out of the strait. There was
a salvo. We heard a hum:
a piano string buzzed back home.
And then

and then we were no
longer rocked
no longer had our gut
walls laved by the lunar washing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Crusted-up inside, becalmed
as if in a sheet of metal
of which our hull was also made.
The hum raised itself into a monody.
One surface. The sea is
the temperature of our brain-
flesh. The air is dust.
The sea is a gray broth.
Snakes wriggle like gobbets
in the fecal stew.
The ship distempered with red dust.
Our mouths are gagged
with a fine red dust.
The air around our sepulcher swirls
full of an acrid fine red dust
of which we are also made.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Anne Winters

The First Verse

Bereshit bara elohim et
ha-shamayim v'et ha-eretz.

—Gen. 1, 1

My black-lettered Hebrew Bible, dense
and doughty as a cobble. The Bible in
Hebrew—irreducible!
Yet at the first verse, a hair-thin net of cracks
appears, each crack a vast highway, and wildly we
leap
onto this first, this universal, cobble, *BERESHIT.*
"In-the-beginning."
Or maybe, "In-the-beginning-*of.*" Of what, you may
ask—of "making"? No—
and so the slight break ramifies and blooms
into shelf-feet of commentaries, monographs, and now
you must swiftly ransack your Sumerian—
yes, without Enuma Elish there's no understanding the
matter—
For it seems that that stately cosmogony begins
with just such another hermetic, mind-boggling
ellipsis,
and so the two master-texts, with archaic courtesy,
nod
across the millennia. But I forgot to mention
the Crimean War. It seems the war upset the local
Karaites, who saddled up and fled
to St. Petersburg, taking their cherished, oldest dated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scrolls of the Bible, wrapped, for freshness, in
date-leaves, and left them
in the Public Library. But naturally, the Public
Library!
And so these sectarians, not even actually, exactly,
Jewish—the rabbis' deep-dyed foes—preserved the
inerrant Word,
though not without hosts of tiny scribal errors
some day to set shuddering
whole forests of editors, compositors, microfilmers—

BARA. Verb transitive, sacred, used with no Subject
but
God, translation "made." We'll do well to pause
for the comment of Rashi, winding forth
from the medieval balconies of Troyes—
"The world is made for Torah." For this very
sentence!
(The lovely sentence—the terrible world.) A floating
circule
next to *BARA* reminds us to look below
our Biblical text with its verse-carets, vowel-points and
the jots
that flourish the great text with the summery human
voice,
for the medieval mine of the Masora,
coded word-frequencies (frequently upbraiding Bible)
with its own typeface, learned circles, note-makers,
exception-takers—
How world upon subworld attests the young Creator
riding the stormwind with earth and moon in his
hands,

ELOHIM. The third word in the Bible is
God. Well literally "gods," but by convention—
except in pagan contexts—though Christians, too,
find Trinity adumbrations here, faint rushes
of the Presence-packed Unseen. Yet our verb

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is a singular verb; God alone is God; and anyway, *BARA*
is male. —What next, a verb should be male? Yes. For such
is the nature of that mode of being
which is the Bible. God, whether singular
or in himself the very host of Heaven,
is male. —But what about goddess Tiamat? Did you know that in Enuma Elish
her wrestling with God produced our world? Her very name
is cognate to "the deep" *(tehom)* God moves on. Of course,
the Enuma Elish is *not* the Bible. But isn't there something
columnar and stark, and, well, male
about this first verse? (This Tiamat sprouts up
in the Psalms, as well . . .)

ET . . . ET? The fourth word in the Bible,
ET? Yes, and the sixth. Translation: asterisk. Even in Hebrew-
English Interlinear, darkly forbidden to students,
asterisk. (Lexicon adds *Mark of the accus.*)
In fact, this recurrent biblical
—unword, reflects the perception
that verbs, in accusing their nouns, comb them out
from the static of the Indeterminate. Think of the Karaites,
how amidst the grapeshot, the dusty saddlery
and willow baskets, they bore off their Bible. And there it lay,
now the Leningrad Codex (L), until the Stuttgart professor
sent for his photographs, and then Kittel proceeded
to make his historic redaction. How leisurely his world
seems from our chaos, a single late-twenties afternoon
of peaceful scholarship . . . His fanatical accuracy, the fonts
made to his specifications, his strangely intelligible
face, melted down in the carpet-bombing of Leipzig—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HA-SHAMAYIM. The heavens. This word
reminds you of Arabic *sham,* as Allah recalls *EL*
or *ELOHIM,* God. Not to mention God's own
self name, the Tetragrammaton, supreme
and half-conjugate IS. Never right-printed or uttered
(in English Bible suppressed, in Hebrew misvowelled), so that
we students, reciting aloud, approaching again and again the great letters
must stammer out LORD, or else NAME. . . .
For so the word is still set up in our time. Even Kittel,
meticulous scholar and (I've never seen this in print) root-and-branch
anti-Semite, whose very professorship, it is whispered . . . But wait, isn't *this*
Kittel's Hebrew Bible (the BHK)? No. Look. This is now "Hebrew Bible
of Stuttgart" (the BHS)—new preface, Masora, even from Leningrad
microfilms new—the K is no more. And why not? You know why
not. Ever try to look up
Endlösung, Final Solution, in a modern German-
English dictionary? Well, it's not there. And where a word
—isn't, mightn't *anything* be? You could replace *BERESHIT*
with "In the beginning the Word"—and *voilà,* you're in Chartres! Why not?
On the right, Jesse's stem, overhead
Heaven's Queen in her rose—this too is the Bible. North of the transept
the cult-statue stands, Black Virgin of Chartres,
her apron lost in initialed bronze tablets,
toes curling, planted on her ancient pillar
which lips of brides caress for centuries,
while tourists stream in before the majesty of *EL*. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Seventh word, last word. *HA-ERETZ,* the earth. Can it
really,
this temple-built, mosque-planted, stave-churched and
belfry'd earth,
be made for Torah? For Rashi is still,
as medieval people loved to do, explaining the Bible.
His argument
weaves on, crochety and scholastic as Romanesque
capitals with their tiny figures from the Apocrypha
where one biblical name, like Tubal-Cain, takes on
a florid history, five wives, and murders with a
cross-bow;
and the Virgin goes on nursing among the heiratic,
sympathizing
beasts' faces, angular as those old Hebrew
characters like fishhooks and little horns
(for the Biblical characters before us are not *exactly*
Hebrew—Chaldean. Aramaic.) Yet everything's here.
As in the delicate
midrash where Moses stands weeping
because he is copying down the words
describing his own death hither-side of Jordan. The
lovely
sentence, the terrible world—the beginning. Inerrant,
perfect, the first verse of the Bible.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bruce Bawer

ASPCA

for Sari

That day in winter: the rows
of shabby cages, stacked
like death-camp bunk beds,
in which tiger kittens gamboled,
young toms hissed or dozed
in corners, old tabbies stared
unblinkingly at us
as if they knew their fate,
and a chipper black-
and-orange-and-white cat
rose to greet us—as if we were
her family, returned home
at the end of day—and nuzzled
the bars of her cage,
to which a three-by-five
card was affixed, decreeing
the date of her demise.

But you were there to issue
a reprieve, and it was
her fate you foiled: checking
her sex, you opened
the cage and carried her
into a world of privilege—
a world of kind
and deferential vets, of bright
windowsills on sunny days,
of arms that plucked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her briskly from the brink
to warm her in the night. How
easy it was, to save a life
and to bestow a home!

Yet every so often I rise
from unsettling sleep, trembling
with the memory of those
others: the ones who hissed
at us, who were too old
or young, or ill or male,
the ones who were fast
asleep when we made
our rounds, and who never knew
how close they'd come
to salvation;
and trembling especially
with the memory
of a certain tom, his fur
shimmering and black
as a sable coat, who gaped
at me, inexplicably startled,
when I entered the place
of death, whose eyes pursued me
with uncanny fascination,
as if he thought that I
were the one who held his life
in my hands, and who,
when we departed, the carrier
newly heavy in your hand,
met my gaze as if he understood.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

House of Women

Susan Minot

It was a quiet summer with a long terrible time of heat. It was blue in the evenings and black at night. The elderberry hung over one side of the house and near the cars were the locust trees with their long leaves. The lights went on in the other houses and glowed yellow. We heard shouting from the family house next door. Things crashed. There were too many children. In the evenings while the kids ate dinner you could see the mother out near the laundry line, daydreaming wearily. There was no sign of a father.

The children didn't have enough to do. They strolled over to our porch with bored, expectant looks, swinging a little. Where's Howard? they said, hoping for someone to catch crabs with. He's not coming this summer, I said. The little girl glanced toward the channel where Howard used to swim in the evenings, as if expecting him to come up the ladder. Are the cats here? cried the little boy, his body going taut as if electrocuted. Yes, I said, under the house. Later I noticed a cat being hauled away in a splayed tortured position, paws skimming the ground.

The house had a lawn in front with a stubby oak in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

middle and encircling the oak a rose bush which dropped its petals. Beyond were the other houses, all white, then a strip of dune grass which bent in a breeze, then the bay. A channel held up with pilings ran alongside the lawn back to a sort of marshy bog where people had little motorboats and tiny docks. Green stalks sprouted back there from shiny green saucers but never, that we saw, produced any blossoms. A female mallard swam alone. All around were stunted things.

Beside the conch shell on the mantelpiece, where I knew it hadn't been a few days before because I'd put a vase of flowers there, I found a light pink rubber pretzel, the kind that babies teethe on. I'd been in the city one day that week to return manuscripts—I worked as a copy editor—and to pick up the next batch but otherwise had hardly left the house. I asked the kids next door if it was theirs and they paused, trying to decide if they wanted a pink rubber pretzel, then decided they didn't and said no. None of the girls in the house knew anything about it and weren't bothered by it, having other things on their minds. I suppose I didn't have enough to think about.

Sometimes at night in our beds the wind hissed and brushed the trees against the house making a sandy sound which lulled us to sleep or kept us up. I must have gotten it confused with my dreams because beneath the sound like sand being thrown against the screen was another sound, far away, which if I hadn't known any better would have thought was the distant wailing of babies in their cribs.

On an evening in July Dick Breen, looking very tan in a white tennis sweater, made his way across the lawn for cocktails on the porch. He was a small man with a large head; his hair was wet and combed. "You're all going to die of cancer," he said, noting the number of cigarettes lit in the twilight.

"We need a man's point of view," said Amy whose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

voice was already getting louder with drink. She'd been up that morning at eight planting the flower beds; then she baked cornbread, then went windsurfing, all before eleven o'clock. "What, Dick, do you think a man wants most in a woman?"

Ruth was only half-listening, picking at her manicure. Not too long ago her boyfriend of five years had left her and married a Japanese woman. We'd all known Porter—he came summers to the house—and were as surprised as she. He was an easygoing guy, handsome in a bland sort of way. When he left her he told her he'd been having affairs all along.

Ruth batted her red hair off her neck. She was very tall, as far from a Japanese person as you can get. "Aren't you hot in that sweater?" she said with annoyance.

"Don't you ever smile?" said Dick Breen. "Don't you ever laugh?"

"When there are funny people around," she said, skin tight over her jaw.

"Howard was funny," Amy said. "I miss Howard."

They all looked at me. "He was funny," I said.

"What happened to him?" Dick Breen said.

"We went our separate ways."

Dick Breen shook his head, amused. "The trouble is, you're all looking for the perfect man," he said. "I have news for you: he's not out there."

Through the curtains I could see the breakfast room where Howard used to read the local paper for hours on end, as if he had all the time in the world.

Dick Breen shrugged. "There is no perfect man," he repeated.

"I'm so glad you told me that," said Helen.

At sunset, sky still light, slowly growing dark, I strolled the narrow strip of sand with the rag piles of seaweed, picking up scallop shells, looking for white ones. The tiny surf rolled in as high as a pencil. When it pulled back there was a shimmering surface spinning with moonshells and periwinkles. I thought I saw when the water

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drew back miniature footprints deep in the soft sand. Each was a couple of inches long, each a few inches apart. Then the next wave shot forward like a rug unrolling and wiped them away.

The Sunday papers lay in disarray on the porch. Candace came up from the beach through the gray air, carrying her coffee cup by the rim. "Dick just asked me for a date," she said. "I told him I was otherwise occupied." Then Candace went on to say how Martin was calling her again and how typical it was now that she finally didn't care.

From around the corner of the house where she was weeding, we heard Amy's voice. "I wouldn't mind being bothered," she said.

The bay was the color of brown tea. When you waded in your knees disappeared, though the water was all right to swim in—just not as inviting. Algae bloom it was called, an imbalance in the ecosystem. Some people felt it was a natural cycle. Others blamed the factories in New Jersey whose spill-off heated up the water. The shellfish in the bay were contaminated. After three summers we were used to it. We no longer knew what the bay looked like under normal circumstances.

We were lying on the beach when Dick Breen appeared, affecting a nonchalant air. Amy was relating her previous night's dream which involved planting seeds and having grass sprout from certain parts of her anatomy.

"Sounds like you need to get laid," Ruth said. Her red hair was piled majestically on her head and she lay on an especially long towel so none of her skin would have to touch the sand.

"Hi, girls," said Dick Breen. He was sporting reflector sunglasses. "Hot, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," said Candace. She rolled onto her stomach and closed her eyes.

I kept reading. Helen got up to scavenge for driftwood

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for her sculpture. Ruth flicked bugs off her long legs. Amy sat in the beach chair doing needlepoint, in a position to chat with Dick Breen. He hunkered down, rocking back and forth on his heels, he gazed up at the sun and plopped down. At the other end of the beach I saw the teenage guy who had bought Howard's Windsurfer taking it out for a sail. He didn't look unlike Howard. Amy was telling Dick about one of the sailboats passing around Shelter Island. She pointed out which one, but Dick's attention was elsewhere. Nearby Ruth lay on her side, smoothing the sand in a fan, then placing with her long fingernails bits of shells in a pattern on it. Abruptly she wiped it out. "I'm roasting," she said and rose to take a swim.

Dick Breen followed.

Ruth kicked away from shore in the brown water, elbows crooked, ignoring the splashing behind her, keeping her head down. Passing the breakwater the surface grew more choppy, small waves slapping her face. The other day, swimming out there, I saw little arms rise out of the churning surface, waving at me. Ruth swam forward, long and sleek, her hair glinting copper in the sun. "So you like to swim?" we heard Dick Breen call. Ruth turned around and a wave smacked her face.

There was a constant grumbling about the heat. We found rusty fans in the attic which clattered all night, had difficulty sleeping. Feet padded over bare floors; we lingered at the top of the stairs in T-shirts and towels, hips jutting, waiting for something to happen, for something to change. To walk down the dark hall and shut the door to our rooms would be to close off a little hope. "It was," Ruth said, closing her eyes to picture the sailing date with Dick Breen, "a complete disaster." He spent the whole time shouting orders at her, as captains are wont to do.

One day late in August I rounded the corner of the house and nearly ran into Dick Breen standing over the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flower beds. "They need water," he said and fixed me with his eye. There was something deeply annoying in that eye and in the way he wore his sport shirts with the collar upright. It was as if nothing could surprise him. A year before, Howard would have been in his ragged pants a few feet away, practicing chip shots on the lawn.

"In case you haven't noticed, there's a drought," I told Dick Breen. "Amy's the one who does the garden anyway."

His gaze bore into me, waiting for me to say something more. "Have you seen the egret?" I said brightly.

"No," he said and came close.

"You should," I said and pointed over my shoulder. "It's back there."

We went to the courts in town to play tennis. There was no one else there with the heat. It was still and quiet, like being in a deserted world.

Our lights stayed on the longest. There were dim lamps in the living room, a flagstone fireplace, peeling rattan furniture.

A pickup truck had been spotted across the channel, leaving the house of our landlord's ex-wife.

"Least someone around here is getting some action," said Ruth.

Out near the back door where she'd pulled the phone, Candace's low voice could be heard talking to her married boyfriend, his family out in their house in Connecticut having all gone to bed.

Out of nowhere Amy said, "One reason I couldn't go through with it"—we all knew she meant her marriage to Dan—"was that after, I thought he would stop wanting to do things with me."

"Don't worry," said Helen, lying on the floor, her hands white with gesso. "He would." Helen had been married to a dentist in Indiana when she was eighteen—a few lifetimes ago, before she became a sculptor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Maybe *you* would have," Ruth said.

"You always say that." Amy and Ruth shared a room out here and saw each other all the time in the city too. They drove out every Friday in their work clothes, stepping onto the driveway with crackling heels.

"I actually do better without a man," Helen said.

"I haven't gotten to that stage yet," I said. I figured one day I would.

Helen was older than the rest of us, thirty-six, and I expected her to say, just wait. Instead she said, "You're lucky."

The sun wasn't up, my room was a black and white photograph without daylight in it. I got out of bed, padded down the hall to the last door and went in. "Candace?" I said.

She squinted at me, not knowing who I was for a moment or where we were. She got up on her elbows, keeping her eyes closed.

I sat on the twin bed. "I think I'm going crazy," I said and got a sort of relieved, airy feeling saying it.

"Who isn't," she said and glanced toward the window to see the light.

"There's a homeless family in my closet."

Candace pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed at her eyes. "It was a dream, Fran," she said.

"They're in there now," I said weakly.

"How'd they get there?" For some reason the logic of this made sense. The light airy feeling drained off. "Stay in here," she said.

I pulled the covers back and forced a laugh. "It felt real," I said.

"It always does."

We lay there on our backs.

"This is no way to live," Candace said.

From my upstairs window I could see his figure cross the lawn and disappear under the front porch. Down behind me through the empty house I heard him, sound-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing strangely far for being directly beneath me, call my name. It sounded odd in his voice, as if it had nothing to do with me anymore. Knuckles rapped on the glass sliding door. I didn't answer.

He knew I was there. My car was outside. From the front he could see I wasn't on the beach. Though I could have been anywhere for all he knew. Maybe I was somewhere else.

"Anybody home?" he called and stepped inside. His voice went lower. "Anybody?" His footsteps thudded then sneakers on linoleum in the kitchen. A pot of coffee was on the stove, warm, though I didn't think he'd notice—still it was there as evidence.

At the back door he opened the screen, saw the morning glories Amy had strung up in an argyle pattern on twine. "Fran?" The door swung shut. A few more footsteps then quiet. He was looking at the chalkboard above the telephone, messages from Helen's gallery, Ruth's sister's thank-you note, sailboat rental rates.

He knew where everything was.

There were footsteps on the stairs. I tiptoed lightly, slowly, arms out, to the closet. It was a deep closet with a diagonal ceiling where the attic stairs came over. I avoided jangling the hangers. I shut the door as much as the warp would allow, leaving a sliver of light.

He reached the top of the stairs, the end of the hall. Through Candace's door was disarray: camera equipment on the floor, bathing suits on doorknobs, towels furled into rosettes. Opposite, the room had beige apple blossom wallpaper with water stains, Ruth's and Amy's room, with beds made and tennis rackets against the footboards. He strode down the hallway past Helen's room with the jars and rags on her bureau amidst the perfume and necklaces.

In my doorway he stopped. I couldn't hear anything. He would see my coffee cup on the windowsill, a manuscript in two piles on my table, the blue pencil on top. I held my breath because breathing can give you away. Fortunately there were sounds outside, the noise of just,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

well, day. Now what was he doing? I couldn't hear. A boat started down in the channel, sputtering, its vibration felt in the room. He could have left for all I could tell. Slowly the boat grumbled off, fading to a hum then to nothing.

He moved. His feet scuffed the floor. The sound was right near me, right near the closet and my heart nearly fled my body. I had no idea he was so close. It set everything pounding in me. I couldn't have moved if I wanted to.

Dick came by the house using the lame excuse of needing to borrow the garden hoe. I didn't ask him why but he proudly volunteered the information. Amy was helping him start a garden. He knew it was too late to plant for this year but he was planning ahead.

The heat was about to break.

Thunder began dimly, rumbling through dinner; there was lightning faint across the water. The sky lit up so the land across the bay stood out darkly then it all went black.

The storm moved in, wild, crashing around the house, rattling windows, lashing rain. For split instants there were ghostly flashes of a drenched world: gray lawn, gray trees, the gray house nearby. Then they disappeared. Everyone was away but Helen, silent in her room, already in bed.

It was after midnight. I went downstairs and stood on the porch with the lights off. Leaves tossed, the bay was pummeled.

Behind the oak in the middle of the lawn I saw something, the edge of a man's shoulder. In the next flash I saw more of him, his whole back, in normal pants and a normal button-down shirt—normal, that is, for Howard.

He turned a little, in the next flash, to face the channel, his profile matter-of-fact. Lightning was coming more frequently, the storm overhead, and then there was another figure carrying a portable phone, Martin, Can-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dace's ex. In the next flash Dan was with them, holding his cigar, not a hair out of place. Each time the world lit up there were more—Porter in a blue-jean jacket, Karl who shaved his beard off after breaking up with Helen, each face with an odd lack of expectation, unaware of where it was. The figures continued to increase, some near the barbecue, one picking up a croquet mallet. There was the guy with the sideburns Ruth brought out one weekend, Amy's co-worker, the bald painter Helen had seen for a while. I recognized the Lebanese man who came in a limo to see Candace and the two brothers who'd fought over her. I saw one of my old flames from college, then the guy I kissed on Bastille Day, then a boy I once knew from Memphis. The flashes were coming less often but each time there were more figures. By the time the thunder had grown faint the lawn was crowded with them, scores of them, patiently gathered in front of our house.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My darling--

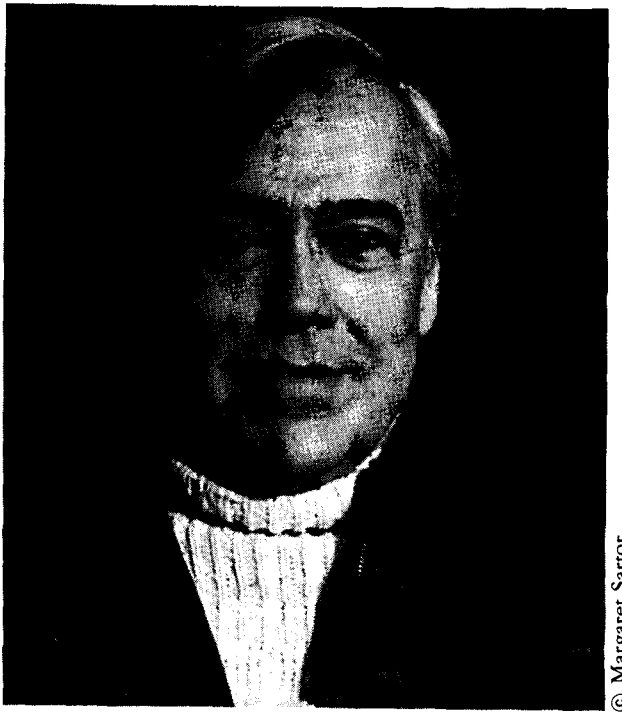
I have to leave you tonight, and it could be for good if fate says Quit. You're deep asleep now and I can't stand to wake you up after what we've gone through all this day, but I ~~truly~~ believe you're safe here now, and I've asked Luna to ~~keep~~ read these pages and pass them to you whenever she thinks you may understand. ~~There's a great deal down in black and white about a whole world of~~ waste and pain but also devotion and the best ~~brands~~ kinds of pardon. Since I've meant to tell the actual truth, I've had to write it for a person older than you are now, a good deal older--the person you'll be in time, I ~~know~~ trust. ~~Smart as you are,~~ it may well take you most of your life to give me the mercy I'm asking for. ~~If I can beg one favor though,~~ even if you don't ~~tackle~~ read them ~~now, please~~ store these pages ~~away somewhere and read them~~ when you're further on ~~in your grown life.~~

See, once I thought I'd rescued you--and then you turned so hard against me ~~and have stayed that way~~--the ~~only~~ principal thing that's mattered to me is leaving behind a ~~means~~ way to help you weigh my ~~serious~~ love and what it caused us: mainly your pitiful father's ~~life~~ and ~~cutting the life long~~ bonds we'd built between us, you and me. And however ~~long from now you start~~ to read ~~and ponder~~, remember ~~this~~. I'm leaning deep on the hope you'll ~~find a way to think about our dark times and~~ see how I did what I could ~~in the circumstances~~--what I thought I could, all any man might try to do for the dearest person he knows on Earth and is desperate to save.

I knew from the instant we ~~ran~~ flew off that I'd ~~committed the solemnest dead a human can.~~ But I saw no way to tell you straight that, yes, I'd

The first manuscript page of the novel Blue Calhoun *by Reynolds Price.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



© Margaret Sartor

Reynolds Price

The Art of Fiction CXXVII

"Cities are the least permanent things in our civilization," according to Reynolds Price, who has centered both his life and his literary work around the rural and small-town culture of the American South. Born in Macon, North Carolina in 1933, he has spent most of his life in his home state, though he has traveled widely. He studied at Duke University as an undergraduate and, earned his B. Litt. at Oxford's Merton College after winning a Rhodes scholarship. In 1958 he returned to Duke to join the faculty of the English department, becoming, in 1977, James B. Duke Professor of English. Except for tempo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rary posts as writer-in-residence at other universities, Price has remained at Duke, where he currently teaches for one semester each year.

In the thirty years of his literary career, Price—as novelist, short-story writer, poet, playwright, essayist and translator—has published twenty-one books, twenty with Atheneum, the publisher of his highly acclaimed first novel, A Long and Happy Life *(1962), winner of the William Faulkner and Sir Walter Raleigh awards. Among the novels for which Price is best known are* The Surface of Earth *(1975), which won the Lillian Smith Award, and* Kate Vaiden *(1986), for which he was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award. His short stories have been included in* Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards *and* The Best American Short Stories. *He has held Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and, in 1988, became a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.*

This interview was conducted on November 19, 1990 at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York City in front of a large audience. Though Price has been confined to a wheelchair since 1984, when he underwent the first of three operations for spinal cancer, he is still a muscular, energetic man. As an artist he has remained unfettered and is, if anything, more prolific now than ever. (A novel Blue Calhoun *and a collection of short stories are forthcoming in 1992 and 1993.) After the interview, Price read from his poems and new fiction. The atmosphere was warm, even familial. At the end of the reading he lifted himself up on the arms of his wheelchair and, on locked elbows, bowed to acknowledge the applause.*

INTERVIEWER

Let's start with the recent and important past. In 1984 you fought an astrocytoma in your spinal cord. Since then you have rolled on to produce the following: *Kate Vaiden, The Laws of Ice, A Common Room, Good Hearts, Clear Pictures, The Tongues of Angels, New Music* and *The Use of Fire.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

You have published poems, essays, plays, novels, novellas, translations. Can you talk about your extraordinary prolificness?

REYNOLDS PRICE

No, I can't—not confidently. My mother had an all-purpose word for any mysterious anatomical reality. She called it an "epizootic." So I always say that the X-ray treatments must have speeded up my epizootic, but that's about all I can offer. One very practical thing that's happened though is that I've had the enormous luck to have, since 1984, one reliable assistant at a time who has lived in my home and has done the kinds of daily chores that are no longer easy for me—groceries and mail and so forth. I've learned what an immense amount of human energy is eaten up by going to get the laundry, much less washing and folding it. I have that much more time available in the day now, but something much larger and stranger has also happened, and I can't say what it is, though I'm grateful.

INTERVIEWER

It's clearly not just opportunity. Are you compelled to write?

PRICE

I'm compelled in a very invigorating way to write. It's not some Dostoyevskian ax-murderer compulsion to spend the day at the keyboard. No, I love to do it.

INTERVIEWER

You're not just staying out of trouble?

PRICE

Not just that, by any means, though idleness quickly poisons me if I let it spread. You've mentioned the crisis of 1984 to 1986 when spinal cancer, three radical surgeries and five weeks of withering radiation paralyzed my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

legs. In the first five months of that long dark night, I couldn't write more than the odd short poem. My mind and hands just would not do it. I couldn't even make myself read, not more than letters or magazines. I was, at first, deeply stunned and then intent in every cell on healing and lasting. Only when a friend, uncoached by me, commissioned me to write a play for a group of young actors was I slowly able to guess that I was free again to focus my attention on something more than my own halved body and its secret inner guerrilla campaign to save what was left, then teach it a whole new life, strange as Mars. In slow motion I wrote a play called *August Snow* through the next two months; and that time warmed my engine enough to send me straight back to finish *Kate Vaiden,* which I'd abandoned at the end of part one, and then on through the eleven books I've started and finished in the past six years. Previously I'd averaged a book every two years at least, so I'd hardly been a great tree sloth; but I'd always said truthfully that writing was hard for me, very hard, and now it's not.

INTERVIEWER

Are you having fun?

PRICE

At this instant?

INTERVIEWER

No! Are you having fun as a writer? Most writers would not admit that they are.

PRICE

Well, I don't want to talk about "the joy of writing" as in "the joy of sex." But it's a deep joy, yes. I like it better than anything else I do except being with a small group of very dear friends, and sometimes I have to skedaddle from them and go back and write for a while.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to when you were a very young child. You were a gifted artist using pen, pencil and paint. In your recent novel, *The Tongues of Angels,* your narrator-hero is an artist. Seeing and turning what you see into something tangible is very important to you. How does the visual intermingle with your obvious love of language?

PRICE

First, my eyes are my primary teachers. And I assume that this is true for a vast percentage of the human race, certainly for the entire sighted portion. For us, the world enters there—it mainly enters my mind through my eyes, and I make of it what I will and can. The granary, the silo—my garnered experience—begins as stored visual observation. I tell my writing students constantly that roughly 95 percent of the human race is legally blind, and I mean it quite literally. You don't have to be in New York to realize that Americans never see anything; you can go to a small country town and realize that an enormous number of the citizens simply don't see anything at any given moment but what they are actually hoping to see.

For some reason or other I was born an avid observer and witness. Both my parents were tremendous watchers of the world. I can remember from my childhood that one of the things my mother loved most was just to drive downtown, park and sit in the car watching people walk by. Europeans and Middle Easterners do that in their piazzas and souks. Of course, if we try it now in Bryant Park or Central Park, we're dead by sundown. But I love to watch the world, and that visual experience becomes, in a way I couldn't begin to chart or describe, the knowledge I possess; that knowledge produces whatever it is that I write. From the very beginning of my serious adult work, when I was a senior in college, my writing has emerged by a process over which I have almost no more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

conscious control than over the growth of my fingernails. The best I can do is to live as if I were training for the Olympics. I try to keep my mind, which is an organ of something called my body, in the best possible physical shape; if I do that, I find that it does my work for me. I think artists of almost all sorts would say that—from great athletes and dancers to poets and composers. There's a huge amount of discipline and training and specific technique that can be learned; but ultimately it's a matter of arriving each morning at the desk and finding that the cistern filled up in the night—or that it didn't, which is mostly my fault.

INTERVIEWER

And that no one will rescue you from having to do something about it.

PRICE

Absolutely. Man the bilge pumps or dig for water!

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned your parents and how your mother taught you to see or taught you that seeing was a great thing to be doing consciously.

PRICE

As a child I thought it was very boring when I had to sit with her on the city streets, but the time sank deep and surfaced later.

INTERVIEWER

In writing about your parents you have referred to and described a three-way marriage among you. You have written powerfully and movingly about your parents. You have imagined and appropriated their lives. When you put together your 1970 collection, *Permanent Errors,* you suggested the cover design, which used a photograph of them as its centerpiece. Would you talk about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

how you have returned, often and fruitfully, to your parents in your writing?

PRICE

They were almost too lovable, which is something I've heard very few people say about their parents. I think both my brother and I, who were their only children to survive infancy, have all our lives been handicapped by the fact that we seldom meet human beings as loyal, affectionate or continuously amusing as our parents were. They were both grand talkers, and my father also had a thoroughly first-class verbal and gestural wit. He was a great comedian—and I'm thinking of Charlie Chaplin when I say that—though he never had a moment's training nor a moment's professional opportunity to exhibit it. Among all his friends, he was absolutely everybody's favorite person to see. By the time I was born in 1933, he was a very serious alcoholic—I don't guess there are any unserious alcoholics—but he made a deal with God when I was born. My mother and I were both in danger during her labor—I was one of the last American bourgeois children born at home—and my father vowed to God that if mother and I survived he would stop drinking. We survived and he did. It took him a couple of years, but he did.

I learned about the vow very early; from that time forward I took on this unsleeping responsibility for my parents, especially my father. I thought they were children who were much younger than I and who needed all the care I could give. I don't think that kind of backwards adoption is rare at all. I used to think that I landed myself in a fairly unique situation, but I continuously find people who tell me that their relations to their parents were almost identical to mine, above all if they were only children as I was for the first eight years of my life. So I just put in enormous years of love and sorrow, desperation and joy—enormous years of practice in managing the lives of these two rewarding but endlessly mysterious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

people and in trying to convince them that I was a valid third within their pairing; amazingly, I think they admitted me.

Then we admitted my brother when he came along, and as families go, I think ours was about as functional as they get. My parents also did something which . . . it's rather awful to say, but which was another gift to me as a writer: they died when I was a young man. My father died when I was twenty-one years and twenty-one days old, which is like something out of William Butler Yeats. My mother died when I was thirty-two.

INTERVIEWER

Why was that a gift?

PRICE

Because they immediately began to recede from me; and I was not faced with the duty, which I would certainly have assumed, of seeing them through old age and illness and a slow death. I'm able to remember them very intensely as the kinds of people they had almost always been for me. I never saw them metamorphose into what I'm now so plainly becoming, an older human being with chronic physical problems.

INTERVIEWER

You return to their youth. You invented their youth.

PRICE

Yes, and I knew a lot about what they thought their youth was because they talked about it constantly. Both sets of memories—their separate childhoods, a long courtship and six hard years at the start of their marriage—were mostly comic, though since my mother was orphaned young, her stories were sometimes deeply awesome: a child's worst fear, abandonment. Like the vast majority of human beings, my parents read little beyond family letters and the daily paper. But they cease-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lessly talked about what they'd seen in their narrow space, though my father would talk about Franklin Roosevelt and what was afoot in World War II. Then television staggered into our lives in the early fifties, and they would talk about Jackie Gleason who was very much like my father as a jester—large but nimble—and about the comic awfulness of Liberace.

INTERVIEWER

I would call you a comic writer sometimes.

PRICE

I think I'm a comic writer always. I hope I am—in the long run anyhow—because I think our existence is comic, finally.

INTERVIEWER

You can be a Rabelaisian comic writer and have done so wonderfully.

PRICE

I love to be funny and am scared not to be. Anyone who was reared in traditional southern culture believes it's important to be entertaining to one's elders and peers. I'm sure this is true of traditional Jewish culture, Chinese culture—Irish, Italian, you name it. I can't think of a culture, except perhaps the Prussian aristocracy, in which it isn't positively desirable. I stand in great dread of boring anyone, though I'm sure I bore some people daily because I do go on, don't I?

INTERVIEWER

So do your characters. They like to talk . . .

PRICE

They talk their heads off. But I try to make the talk as interesting as the way my parents and kin spoke, which was fine indeed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Now a nastily academic reader—and we don't know any, but there might be some—would say that your characters are often wooing one another, that they're warm and generous people, they love one another, the greatest gift they can give is the gift of themselves. I see your characters, almost like those of the *Pietà,* bearing themselves to one another—but they can never pierce that invisible membrane, can they? Would you care to talk about the sorrow that they all come up against: that they can't finally be inside one another permanently, give one another their whole lives?

PRICE

Has anyone ever? I think it's Aldous Huxley who talks about two lovers sweating quietly palm to palm. No, unless we possess supernatural abilities, we can never be certain that we've entered the mind and soul of another creature. I suppose as a very young child I felt what I later discovered was common in children, especially lonely children, which was that I did believe I completely entered the minds of certain animals who accompanied me—family dogs, for instance; and I thought they understood me entirely. I'm not at all sure I was wrong, and the knowledge gave me occasional peace and the daring to try the same with humans. But partly because I was the junior add-on member of this triangle in which I lived, I became aware early of the gap that threatens to open between us at all times, and that I think must be calculated into all the relations we try with one another.

INTERVIEWER

So you have people being charming and roguish and loving with one another . . .

PRICE

I think ideally we're constantly involved in a kind of benign seduction of one another. This ties in with my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

notion that we're partly here to entertain one another, certainly to make one another's passage as interesting, suspenseful and painless as we possibly can.

INTERVIEWER

Would I be correct in saying that it is the women in your fiction who often realize that the final gap in a relationship cannot be bridged—and then reconcile themselves to that fact?

PRICE

I never thought of it that way, but your guess sounds terribly right. If women understand, it's because they create the rest of the human race. They make these children in their bodies, and the children leave their bodies. Their children are not their bodies. Their children turn out to be portable and detachable, and women are faced with their tragicomic ability to create but not to possess, however hard many parents may attempt that form of demonic possession. All the smartest people that I knew as a child were women—much smarter than the men—in the sense that they were wise, shrewd, foreseeing. The men were often lovable—I grew up in a family of charming drunks, if that doesn't seem an offensive oxymoron; but there wasn't a drunk or addictive female in the family; so the women were the great generals, the great feeders and healers—all but perfectly patient and endlessly expert at taking pain and changing it somehow to usable coinage.

I figured that much out very early. And one of the things I like about my work—and I'm not going to tell you what I don't like about it—is that it presents a rich, and I think very true, gallery of strong women. I'm proud to have made them, in so far as I did make them.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any reason why men can't write about female protagonists and vice versa?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRICE

All together now: men are reared by women, and women are reared by women in our culture, and I can think of very few cultures in human history in which an opposing situation prevailed. An alert boy then spends his most sensitive and receptive years almost exclusively in the presence of women—mothers, aunts, baby-sitters. A girl spends her formative years almost exclusively in the presence of women as well—Father is someone who comes home at six o'clock and is tired and cranky at best. The only serious exceptions I can think of are the Brontë sisters, who were reared by their father and their crazy brother.

In recent years feminist critics, some of whom have instructed me and to whom I'm very grateful, have studied the number of men who've written in the female first person, in the English language alone, since the beginnings of prose fiction. Right off in the eighteenth century there were minds as capacious as Defoe's in *Moll Flanders* and Samuel Richardson's in *Pamela* and *Clarissa,* not to speak of successors like Tolstoy and Flaubert. A few years ago I began to write an essay for *The New York Times Book Review* in which I tried to make a list of extraordinary males who had written fiction about women and who had been accepted by both male and female readers. I also tried to find women who had written in the voice of a man, not just about men but in a man's voice. And, of past and present necessity, the women's list is a lot shorter—not that I mean to award merits or demerits because women don't frequently write in a male voice. Again I suspect that the situation is mainly a result of the fact that most children are reared by women and only start to become other things fairly late in the growth of their minds and imaginations (one of my great teachers, Lord David Cecil, started me on this tack in England in the fifties). It's a fact no more or less interesting, though surely less culpable, than the fact that millions of men, some novelists included, blind themselves for life at ado-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lescence to the vast amount they've learned, from the time of their conception on, about women.

I hope, as I said in my *Times* essay, that a great many more women will attempt the adventure in impersonation, inhabitation. And because I said this in the essay, of course, I got a small raft of mail from radical feminists who thanked me to keep my hands out of their business and let them get on with the complete exploration of the female sensibility and the complete omission of the male.

INTERVIEWER

There are some fine women writers.

PRICE

Oh, absolutely. Writers like Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison—to name Americans only—are as broad in their grasp as anyone living or dead. And some younger wide-gauged women and men are coming to light, though I find strangely that among my students there are now more macho females than males—*macho* here meaning self-gender absorbed to the point of blindness.

INTERVIEWER

Let's jump way back to 1964. Reynolds Price writes: "I will claim that the best American fiction of the next twenty years is likely to be regional rural fiction." Time is well up. Were you right? I think you do believe that city fiction has constraints upon it that rural fiction might not.

PRICE

Well, I think that the essay you're quoting from, which I wrote for the old *New York Herald Tribune*—to tell you how long ago it was—is called "Country Mouse, City Mouse." It posits the theory that the richest fiction, certainly the richest fiction that we've had in the Western tradition, has arisen out of a kind of bipolar relation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

between city and country. You have only to think of Proust, Thomas Mann, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski or George Eliot—virtually any of the novelists whom we continue to read. Their plots and characters rotate a month in the country, then six months in town. That rotation lent a kind of geographical and tonal breadth to their fiction. I think we continue to listen for this in contemporary fiction, which is often trapped within the walls of modern cities.

I wonder what the first absolutely urban novel is that we continue to read. It may be something quite late, as late as Kafka's *The Trial.* I wouldn't be surprised to discover that Kafka might be the first large novelist to be trapped in a city—part of his atmosphere of desperation floods in from that fact that there's not a tree or a brook in view. Remember that stunning scene in *The Metamorphosis* when we've spent the entire story locked in Gregor's apartment, but at the end the family goes out into the country again after Gregor's been . . .

INTERVIEWER

Thrown in the trash.

PRICE

Dead—exactly. But I dodged your question. It may seem a self-fulfilling prophecy, but the fiction I remember most intensely from the past thirty years, and that looks most durable, continues that ancient town-country swing—Robert Stone, Toni Morrison and Eudora Welty again, the core of John Updike, Tom McGuane, García Márquez. And in those three decades, not only an exclusively urban fiction but even the thought of what our cities have become—unendable nightmares—is more repugnant and less useful than ever.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel claustrophobic when you read city fiction?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRICE

I guess it's clear by now that I seldom read it. I'm a deep-dyed hedonist, and I do very few things by choice that I don't enjoy. I do read some detective fiction though, which winds up occasionally being intensely urban, and I watch urban movies for the terror and pity.

INTERVIEWER

What's the most fun for you to read?

PRICE

Biography, every time, and history. With fiction I'm always hopelessly behind, as you and most practitioners are, in reading the books of my friends which arrive more or less hourly in the mail—we're all such industrious marmosets. No, I still enjoy fiction which is as broadly based as possible, and I think the majority of my own work is not primarily rural. It's primarily small town to small city and rural. Richmond, Virginia and Raleigh, North Carolina are about as large as cities get in my work until now, or Oxford, England in the case of one novel which is largely set there; but I love the revealing truth of that tick, that pendulum tick back and forth between city and country.

Of course, we now have endless citizens of the Western world who've been reared entirely in urban surroundings, children who think chocolate milk comes from black cows. And the problem for them as potential writers and readers is not simply that cities are loud or dirty or dangerous. The root problem is that cities are the least permanent things in our civilization. Any pebble on the outskirts of town stands a far better chance of lasting than New York City does. New York City can disappear in an instant if the wrong person presses the wrong button. It would be very difficult to destroy the planet as such. This reminds me always of Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he says that his choice of scenes is largely from country life because there we are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

presented with the permanent objects of nature which are best suited to contemplation. I mean, if you contemplate Trump Tower—if you sneeze—it may not be there. It may have been improved, disimproved, imploded or exploded.

INTERVIEWER

It is named after a fellow author we ought to acknowledge! You may not read his books, but . . .

PRICE

I haven't, no. My eyes wouldn't do it.

INTERVIEWER

You read a lot of poetry, essays, nonfiction. You write poetry, plays, essays and memoirs. You translate the Bible. You study things and write about them. How do the different forms in which you work affect your writing of other forms? How does the writing of poetry affect your writing of fiction, and the writing of memoirs affect your translation of the Bible and so forth?

PRICE

That's interesting; I never thought about it.

INTERVIEWER

I knew we'd surprise you if we kept up.

PRICE

Those switches of events—I think of them as events almost more than genres—are generally not matters of conscious choice for me. I just find myself doing so and so. I'm presently trying to finish a novel; and I'm beginning to have this sense here in the core of my brain, this sounding note which says that the next book may be a memoir, a play or a short novel. So my mind may be in here—I hope it is—working on that next thing, conceiving that next child. But I very seldom sit down and think,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm coming to the end of this story. What do I want to do next, a play or a sonnet?" I can't remember ever doing that. I do know that I'm not good at writing two different kinds of things at once. I can't rub my belly and pat my head, in terms of the various genres. I might be able to put a novel aside for a couple of days to write a book review or a very short poem that rushes in, but that's about it.

I wish I had a little bit less of a one-track mind; but the creating, unconscious portion of my mind works best and most reliably when it's allowed to do one thing. I've mentioned this endlessly in interviews and to students, but a novelist friend of mine said one of my favorite things: "The unconscious is like children and dogs. It loves routine and hates surprises." If you'll think about that, there are probably no exceptions. If you get your whole mind to where it's supposed to be at nine o'clock tomorrow morning—or you name the hour—whatever the chore is, your chances are far better for *doing* the chore if you feed your mind when it expects to be fed and then let it do what you've told it to. The mind, after all, resides in a physical organ—the brain, whose needs are known.

INTERVIEWER

The unconscious is a great resource, I think, for all serious writers. Quite clearly in your writing about your own writing you've made it clear that you rely upon that dreaming pool.

PRICE

I think it's so absolutely amazing—that I go to sleep at night and whatever's needed in the morning is there. I don't say this in rapt self-love, but I do assume that almost all the work I've written has been of interest and use to a few more human beings than myself, so I assume that I'm not psychotic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Or that we are!

PRICE

Alas, a great many of our human brothers produce narrative that is absolutely sealed from you and me. We presently call them schizophrenic; and there are probably a dozen within three blocks of here as I speak, if not more. You and I, when we unburden our unconscious at breakfast, or in whatever we make in the course of a day, tend to produce something that actually communicates with another member of the species *Homo sapiens;* so we're not stuck with that awful but prevalent curse, "the sound of one hand clapping." Someone whom we call mad in our culture is stuck with the sound of one hand clapping, and I'm grateful that my unconscious hasn't stuck me with that, though a time or two it's backed me up a mute, black alley.

INTERVIEWER

Your characters emulate you in this regard: they dream a lot for us.

PRICE

They dream a lot in some of the books. Well, we all dream a lot unless we're dead.

INTERVIEWER

Not everybody's characters do. You are unhesitating, I would guess, in permitting their dreams to have an effect in their daily, waking lives. Dreams are important to your characters.

PRICE

They are. I always think that's strange because I almost always undergo a sort of terrible "Oh, no. We're really in for it now," in my head when a friend says, "I had the most interesting dream last night." I try to let my charac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ters' dreams be at least interesting and indicative of who they are, but I've used them less in the more recent fiction. Maybe that's because, as we grow older, we recall our dreams less clearly.

INTERVIEWER

Although dreams are certainly important in the new book of poetry, *The Use of Fire.*

PRICE

They are, but the poems are more nearly autobiographical than the fiction; and a few dreams have mattered in my own life, especially in this new existence as a seated man.

INTERVIEWER

You are a religious writer. You are a writer of annunciations. People get news from the other world, and not always through dreams. I would call your books serious religious fiction. I'm not speaking only of your work directly with the Bible. Do you care to talk about that? I don't mean a great confession of your faith, although you may wish to give that to us, but about the role of actively being religious in your fiction?

PRICE

I think you'll be much happier if I don't, not because I'm ashamed but because I think what can be communicated on that subject is communicated in the work itself—what *I* can communicate. There's a chapter about it in *Clear Pictures.* I don't see my work as proselytizing, certainly not in any sectarian way. I grew up in a particular American religious tradition, which was southern Christianity, and in my own immensely unorthodox way, I've remained in that tradition with no great problems to my intellect because it reached me so early and deeply. I still have very intense relations with what I can only rather spookily call "the unknown," which definitely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

doesn't mean Ouija boards or table tilting, though it does mean constant meditation and attempts at least to communicate hopes and various other forms of requests to a creator, *the* Creator, since I assume there's only one. I think that all my work and its overreaching conviction of the comedy of history comes directly out of an unshaken knowledge that's been inside me all my life. Again though, I won't be passing out cards and asking you to step forward and give your life to the Lord here now. That's *your* lookout.

INTERVIEWER

Hosanna.

PRICE

Hosanna.

INTERVIEWER

Let us move from the sublime to the wonderfully ridiculous. You once thought to ask, in words, I believe, not unlike these: "What was Madame Bovary like in bed, and should we care?" I've always meant to ask you about this. You were raising other issues, larger issues. Please talk about that for a minute.

PRICE

I wish I'd invented that question. In the seventies *Esquire* asked me to write an article about new sexual freedoms in fiction. It was really the time in American fiction when suddenly we began to realize, My God, I can say anything I want to, and even Jesse Helms can't stop me! I can portray any sexual act. I can indulge any private peculiarity in prose, and if I can convince a publisher to print it and send it to the bookshops of America, no one's going to clap me in jail. So I tried to look seriously at the question of how much sexual freedom a serious novelist really needs and can use.

For clarity's sake I tried to look back, rather than examining my contemporaries. I looked at *Anna Karenina,* and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I said that essentially Tolstoy does not need to tell us any more about Anna's private sexual life than he does because it's not a book about sex. It's a book about something else—how the best of us may conspire with fate to end our lives and harm those near us. I said that Flaubert probably would have benefited had he been able to tell us more about what Emma's actual adulterous unions are like for her, because the whole subject of the novel is Emma's romantic and romantically poisonous delusions about sexual love. It was *Esquire* who gave it the title, "What Did Madame Bovary Do in Bed?" I think I called it something really dull like "Uses for Freedoms," which I manfully restored when it reappeared in a collection of my essays called *A Common Room* a few years back.

INTERVIEWER

What was she like in bed? Boring? Selfish?

PRICE

Rather stunned and frantic, I would think. And I don't say it to be comic. I suspect stunned and frantic, breathless and shockingly cold to the touch.

INTERVIEWER

Many people, and I confess I am one of them, like to set upon people by reading them the first long sentence of your first novel, *A Long and Happy Life,* which is to me a remarkable poem and a great piece of writing. Some people, in talking about this sentence, make the mistake of talking about you as a Faulknerian writer. It turned your hair white.

PRICE

Turned my hair white, clearly.

INTERVIEWER

You have written very movingly about Faulkner. Would you mind addressing for just a moment the Hemingway-Faulkner question, if it is a question?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRICE

Here's something else I've spent too much of life explaining; but one more time—Faulkner has not been an important writer for me. I didn't begin to read him until I was midway through college. Till then I barely knew of his existence. In fact, the American public barely knew of him until he won the Nobel Prize, courtesy of the French and the Swedish. Hemingway, however, was tremendously important to me as a very young reader—just that Greek lucidity of his early stories and novels seemed to me a code that was worth learning and transmuting into one's own code, if that were possible; and it turned out to be. When I came to read Faulkner later—and I've still by no means read all of his novels—I found myself within a sensibility and a world that was not magnetic to my own and that I really didn't wish to spend a great deal of time deciphering.

Early in my career, really right on down into the middle, a number of readers said, "Oh, here comes another Faulknerian novel," which simply meant that people in my novels often talked in some fictional version of the way that people tend to talk, or did talk, in the American South. And since Mr. Faulkner and I were citizens of the same country—this strange republic called the South—some of our characters and prose rhythms resemble one another, but I can't see that there's a more direct relation than that. Everyone who grows up in a highly flavored culture tends to sound a bit like everyone else who grows up in the same culture.

INTERVIEWER

The long stories in *The Foreseeable Future* say much about interracial relationships, and one is about a beautiful love affair between a black woman and a white man. You have always written about the races without ideology, saying in effect, that we Americans are these hues, all these hues are in my experience and on my palette, hence I employ them. You never preach about race, though it worries you deeply in your memoirs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRICE

From the day I was born, with a black midwife assisting my mother, right on through my early manhood, I lived in the fairly steady presence of strong, affectionate, funny and endlessly resourceful black men and women. So yes, I was troubled about them—troubled hard—from at least age four when I started to feel their human plight. And from the absolute start of my work, early in high school, I've aimed at describing what I saw and learned in their patient company and at handing on the gifts they so unstintingly gave me—the daily sight of tragedy borne and transcended, an avid taste for life and for others, not the lone hungry self.

I can't recall being challenged ever, not face to face, about those numerous fictional pictures; but through the years I've heard a rumor or two that so and so thinks me racist because of some trait I've truthfully shown. At such times I've tried to examine my eyes and heart for failures or crimes; but what I find remains the same—and it's what I feel about all human differences (race, gender, class): a sane and truly watchful human can enter any human skin and roam at will through its mind and body.

INTERVIEWER

You teach creative writing. And you also teach Milton. Does teaching still nourish your writing?

PRICE

I think it must. I began teaching full time in 1958; but since 1963 I've only taught one semester a year, which now as semesters are shrinking by the week, is an almost shamefully short period of time—about four months. So I spend four months a year doing that, teaching two classes, two days a week—generally Narrative Writing and The Poetry of Milton; and it's done irreplaceable things for me. It's kept me in touch with whatever the younger generation, or at least the upper middle-class younger generation, is doing in America at that time. In fact I stay in closer touch with youth than do my physi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cally fecund friends: their children grow up, and mine remain eighteen to twenty-two. I also am annually exposed to the best debunkers in any culture—the young—and I take steady pleasure in trying to slip them, like notes between jail cells, the few hard sureties I think I know about human decency and all the danger it's constantly in from our native bent to reckless self-reward and hate. They almost never say whether the notes have reached them or what they think of the contents. But that's a darkness all parents or foster parents live and die in. We only hope we're partly right, that they hear us partly and hand the word on.

INTERVIEWER

When you start a book what happens? You are about to start a book and you are finishing another. What do you do physically? What happens psychically? How do you know that this dreadful thing is going to happen again?

PRICE

Well, presumably the unconscious has done a lot of cooking in the basement. Then the odors begin to pervade the ground floor; I think, "Apparently I want to write this novel about a thirty-six-year-old man who runs away with a sixteen-year-old girl." Then I'll probably go to the keyboard and begin making notes which are not at all detailed plans. I never have elaborate outlines, not since *A Long and Happy Life.* I just write endless letters to myself: "What if he's gray eyed and meets her in a music store in downtown Raleigh in April 1956?" They're contingency studies, strategic extrapolations; and I may write those for x number of weeks, months or years, depending on the complexity of the material and on what else I'm doing before I really get to concentrate on that particular job. Then I tend to get a first sentence. It arrives almost invariably in bed, when I've got to turn the lights on and write it down on the bottom of a Klee-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nex box or something because I never think to have any real writing materials at hand.

Sometimes I'll say, "I'm going to begin it full time on my father's birthday," or "I'm going to begin it on the anniversary of so and so." That might be six weeks ahead or three weeks ahead, and I pack in the complex carbohydrates and begin the physical and mental training. And then that morning I cut the ribbons and go in and start it—the actual novel, no more plans or guesses. In recent years I've written at the rate of somewhere between three to ten pages a day; and that will constitute a first draft—written six days a week, more or less all day and sometimes at night. Then I'll completely run the first draft back through my fingers on the keyboard. Then I'll print it out. Then I start revising by hand on paper. After *x* number of those cycles, I feel that it's finished; it falls off the tree, and I ship it away.

INTERVIEWER

And it lands in our next question—the dreaded one—about the state of fiction today. Is there anything you care to say about the state of fiction today?

PRICE

I think it's better than ever before in the history of the American novel, much richer. I think there are better novelists at work now than have ever written in American fiction, period.

INTERVIEWER

Does that mean that American publishing is doing what it ought to do, or that the writers are just eroding the system?

PRICE

I've had freakishly good luck as someone who needs to be published. I'm one of the few serious American writers who is published now by the same firm—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Atheneum—that published his first book a whole generation ago. But I'm well aware that—as an industry, as a service industry which presumably exists to encourage writers to produce honest books which are then purveyed as fetchingly as possible to a prepared public—publishing is in ghastly condition—but so are a great many other things like marriage, child rearing and human kindness. I've just had the steady good fortune to be able to write what I wanted to write, see it published and then reach thousands of people.

INTERVIEWER

Where are these good writers coming from who are somehow prevailing upon the system, or conquering it, or enduring it?

PRICE

I don't know. I think the birth of any unusually creative person is completely unpredictable, at least until we get all our genetic research done and can pop out a little Picasso anytime we want or a larger writer than Sappho or Chekhov. I don't think, by the way, that our present best writers are specifically coming from the various graduate programs in writing. Not that I'm an enemy of graduate training in writing, as such—there are some honorable places to go and some that are worse than worthless. As usual in American education, a few students will benefit. But most lack the congenital gifts of linguistic skill, tale-finding eyes and that other crucial ingredient: the will and endurance of an old snapping turtle, waiting deep in the pond till it's ready to seize. Most of the students waste their time and money. I always tell my writing students that, if they really want to know, I'll meet them in private and say what I think their real chances are for a lifetime of good books, provided they know that whatever I say is just my opinion, however earnest. The chief harm in charging people for writing degrees is of course the lie you're all but bound to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tell—that each one's a possible Conrad or Brontë—when most of them can't even tell a good joke, much less the stories of this huge country. For by now it's a country with an immensely complicated history, a history which contains at least several epic tragedies on a national scale which have produced for our contemplation a culture of almost infinite diversity and tragic enormousness, if not enormity, as it goes its comic way. We've recently been reminded, by Ken Burns's eloquent PBS series, of the Civil War as perhaps the single biggest experience which we've even begun to digest, so far. We haven't even *tasted* the tragedy of the white man's extermination of the American Indian.

INTERVIEWER

You have been quoted—I think it's on the dust jacket of your second novel, *A Generous Man*—as believing that literary art should be useful public objects, mirrors, telescopes. Useful in what way? Public objects in what way?

PRICE

Well, first, I was speaking of my own aims, not prescribing for others. But as a personal program, the aim has survived for me. Maybe it's because I come from a tribe who were not literary in the sense of deep readers and because the kindest friends of my childhood were hardworking members of small-farm families with little time to puzzle out words in an obscure sentence. Whatever the cause, I've always wanted my written work to be about interesting and emblematic people in compelling actions—magnetic men and women (good or bad) whose lives are watchable for pleasure, pity, terror, purgation and instruction. And I've always tried to keep the prose or verse as cleanly lined and clear as was compatible with the truth of the moment—the character, the act, the thought—so yes, public objects in that broad sense, not private fetishes for my monk's cell.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

I have one more question: over twenty years ago I wrote you the usual gawky, dumb fan letter. It said what all the other fan letters said. You answered mine and talked to me over the years about my own writing, and I am eternally grateful for what you said and sometimes for what you didn't say. It happens again. It happens tomorrow. You get home to Durham, and there is a letter from some bright-eyed kid, and she writes to you, "I want to write." What will you say to her? What can you say to her?

PRICE

Try not to! Very seriously, if you can *not* do it, don't do it. It has to be a compulsion. It's much too squirrelly, if you're not a squirrel—or the turtle I mentioned. It's too weird a job unless you're compelled to go off in a room alone and spend days and years making small black marks on large white paper. It's such a bizarre choice to make, if you make it a choice; but for me it was a *given,* and it's brought me enormous amounts of joy. And it's helped me to please more than a few strangers. I've said often before something that my only writing teacher, William Blackburn, told me once when we were colleagues at Duke. When I came back to teach, I asked him how candid I was supposed to be in discussing student papers. He said to remember what Ben Jonson said, "Never tell a young poet all his faults." All would be just too overwhelming, too withering.

Yet I do think that American writing teachers are much too kind generally, too kind to the point of perjury. Flannery O'Connor, in her sidewinder way, said a dead-true thing: "Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them." She apparently meant more or less the same thing that I mean by saying, "Quit if you can. Don't take this up at all lightly." If the person persists and starts sending me his or her published books,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then I'm often interested and try to like the work and say that I do. Writing is a fearsome but grand vocation—potentially healing but likewise deadly. I wouldn't trade my life for the world.

INTERVIEWER

We've left so much out.

PRICE

Ninety-nine percent. But it's all in the work—not a secret spared.

—**Frederick Busch**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael Burkard

Before the Dark

Fred,
I don't know what to do.
About me and you and the dream
which knocks and knocks at me, now has
me consistently in dream's time:
am completely in belief then
hapless

realize,
of course,
dream, dream,
it's only a dream. So: here you are,
with me, not quite, after a quarter of a century,
and I am simply missing you
as I have been prone to do, especially

since being sober.
For you were one of the few lives I have felt
I walked away from, never wanting to,
although realizing that it might have
happened regardless, and, also,
you may have had a part
in parting too.

Have you ever dreamed me?

*

Before the dark
I moved the glass
from the edge of the bureau,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so that in the dark
I will not walk and reaching for an edge
knock the glass.

And when I close her door
which is also mine
I always have to take her bag
from the door
—otherwise the door
just might not close
and I would have to do it over again.

This too is before the dark.

*

Dreams, Fred, may not be a sign to get in touch.
They may be just the opposite.

When I write a letter home it's painful to be personal
because it never seems read that way, or answered.

I don't do it all the time. I've gotten used to that.
One gets more used to the moon when one knows
one is a piece of it.

One more road for belief, or trust,
even if there isn't an answer.

Dreams may be just the opposite:
gateways through which a you or me could pass

without having answered ourselves.
As if we are signposts, take one step more.

Perhaps my brother has seen a dream like this,
or approximated whom he has dreamed most in time,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and thus whom he is closest to
in being.

I do not know if my brother has such thoughts,
and less often take the attitude he ought to.

But you, Fred,
did you ever say *before the dark*

and mean anything other than evening?
Yes, most likely.

I have not heard your voice for a quarter of a century
but I can hear you say it, *before the dark,*

and mean evening, or night just before the final light
goes off, and still something slightly more.

*

Rain on a trailer roof.
Train passing nearby on track beside lake.
Fred and Sue, Marco . . .
and the evening for me which would be
my parting from them.
Except for a year later, again in rain,
Fred visiting town, stopping me on the street
from his car, and in that tone of his which
was real and true: "You're not really getting
married, are you?" He, like me, knew it was
too soon, so soon, that there was some
unnamed-by-everyone trouble for me.
I knew too.

*

Last words:
time and time again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neighbors entering
the yard at dusk,

hanging around,
dark coming.

Their voices
got quieter in the dark.

Their shirts were not sparks
but little dots seemed

to begin to move
around. Quiet.

Last words.
Time and time

again spring
entered the winter.

I wanted to stay put,
oh for just once,

where I was.
But went off.

Leave the town
slowly or it will

tear you up,
maybe even to pieces.

People like Fred had
something I wanted,

if I knew what to call it
I would. Last words.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I wanted to stay put,
smell the spring,

just that. Not move,
let someone know me.

Make neighbors
of spring—make

before the dark
a ring of friendship.

Maybe that's why
the neighbors literally

milled around,
a little like animals

at a water hole,
a little awkward,

a little wondering
where to go next

and just when.
Sparks! It is possible

that in gazing at the moon
a time or two they became

the moon for just a moment.
Light translated between

the few of them and the moon.
And me a part of being

also. Whether there
or apart, before the dark

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or not. Last words:
dream on, dream on,

whatever it may mean.
There's a name there

unnamed by everyone.
Fred

is one
of many names.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Martin Edmunds

Moon,

I think you would understand
my craft of writing, how it makes of me
your king and creature in this no-man's-land
of the moment;
the wide-eye, squint-eye vision that by turns
I loose upon your beauty, my soft palm
and callused fingers of an archer's hand;
and how my introspection bends me to
you, filling the mirror of this blank white sheet
with your circle of renewed virginity
that, by violating, I complete.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Christopher Benfey

Something Like a Rainbow

The storms that make it into poems most often
leave something like disaster in their wake:
the wine-glass elms in pieces on the lawn,
the chimney cracked, the basement a shallow lake.
This morning's storm was nothing much by contrast—
a shiver of wind, no more than a minute's rain.
Time enough to close the windows fast
in time to have to yank them wide again.
And yet it was as though the world had slept,
or I had, waking now to find out how
a storm will sometimes leave a golden frame
in which there's room for something like a rainbow
to fan its shifting colors into flame—
a promise rashly made and richly kept.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Typos

Though prudes once thought St. Gaudens's
golden-thighed
Diana too exposed to perch above
the old squat pile of Madison Square Garden,
telling the wind's direction with her bow,
surely that doesn't constitute just cause
for the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*
(second edition) to spell the name "St. Baudens";

nor for that matter does the august line
of Boston Lowells give it an excuse
to pluck an *i* from Cal's clear-eyed description
of granite soldiers (thinner till they rival
the lean colonel Shaw in Boston Garden)—thus
invoking a plague of preppies or mud-daubers
that leaves the sculpted Union dead "wasp-wasted."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Andrew Hudgins

Aunt Mary Jean

As we stood by the casket, Momma gasped,
through tears, "Look hard! You must remember her!"
I looked hard, tried to memorize the slight
malicious curl of her thin lips—too red—
and then I studied how her dyed hair puffed,
blond around her pinched blond face. With powder,
the undertaker's hand was more restrained
than hers had been. And, all in all, I thought
she looked a little better dead—relaxed,
less mean, and more alive. Though not the way
that Momma meant, I've done what I was told:
remembered Mary Jean. It's Momma who's
becoming smudged and indistinct because
I've rubbed that memory featureless with grief.
But if she heard me call her Momma, "Boy,"
she'd snap, "I'm not your momma, I'm your mom."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Roald Hoffmann

Giving In

At 1.4 million atmospheres
xenon, a gas, goes metallic.
Between squeezed single-bevel
diamond anvils jagged bits
of graphite shot with a YAG
laser form spherules. No one
has seen liquid carbon. Try
to imagine that dense world
between ungiving diamonds
as the pressure mounts, and
the latticework of a salt
gives, nucleating at defects
a shift to a tighter order.
Try to see graphite boil. Try
to imagine a hand, in a press,
in a cellar in Buenos Aires,
a low-tech press, easily
turned with one hand, easily
cracking a finger in another
man's hand, the jagged bone
coming through, to be crushed
again. No. Go back, up, up
like the deep diver with
a severed line, up, quickly,
to the orderly world of ruby
and hydrogen at 2.5 megabar,
the hydrogen coloring near
metallization, but you hear
the scream in the cellar, don't
you, and the diver rises too fast.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ponder Fire

I wonder if phlogiston theorists
were lovers, if it began when they
were set off, like the brown grass

on the hills a little north of here.
It takes so little, a touch, to burn.
They had it right, sly Becher

and Stahl, the principle is fire.
Wood, coal, and lovers, and metal
too are rich in it, it's what's

expelled in a flame. And the stuff
left behind, spent ashes (and they
were right too in the slow burn

of rust) is emptied, lax, the head
of a long untuned drum. An inconstant
agent at the heart of this plausible

theory, sometimes free, sometimes
much combined with the base, antsy
to move out, but often held, dearly.

Its loosing can banish weight, as you
coming on me, do. It can add stones,
the thought this consuming day will end.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alan Michael Parker

Blackbird Villanelle

One red-winged blackbird can't begin
Without the other, hidden in the cedars.
Listen, listen, listen,

For he struts between
The notes, a guard among his prisoners.
The other blackbird can't begin

To answer any of her questions
Because the weather tells her
Listen, listen, listen.

So she listens to him sing,
His *kong-ka-ree* a stubborn plea for
What one blackbird can't begin

Alone, no matter if he's masculine.
Will she whisper, *Mister*
Listen, listen, listen,

Or will her waiting prove to him
The prison he's been waiting for?
Two red-winged blackbirds finally begin:
Listen, listen, listen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Del Plunko Performs

Richard Stern

I

An odd town, Venice has always drawn oddities to itself. Feel displaced, unwanted, unappreciated, come to Venice. Too contemptuous, indolent or poor to wash, shave or dress in one of the ninety more or less acceptable modes of the day, come to Venice. Want your nullity glamorized, your vacuity filled, your stupidity mistaken for wit, your silence for sagacity, come to *la Serenissima.* Bums, thieves, con men, frauds, every kind of poseur and viper, they're all in this beautiful, watery zoo.

Something like this is one of George Share's summer tunes. For twenty years, Venice has been one of his pick-me-ups. Not this summer. Not the fault of the summer companion. Bug Venerdy is reasonable, good-humored, grateful, patient, calmly enthusiastic, unaggressively amusing. Young enough to be—and often taken for—his daughter, she supports laughs, looks and Italian insinuations with easy grace. She is also lovely to regard, touch,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pass all kinds of time with. George had brought her mother here twenty-two years earlier.

No, there are other reasons, internal, external. The worst of the last is the heat. The sirocco blows out of the Sahara, picks up Mediterranean water and dumps it steamily on the city. People move through the streets like long-distance swimmers, scooping air for forward progress, gasping, sagging. George sits in the long bathtub—it takes half an hour to fill it—drinking the thin Veneto white wine from a mug filled with tiny ice cubes. He reads the *Gazzettino.* It reports all Eurasia is gripped by heat. In Palermo, a man beats his wife to death with a Bible. In Milan, the Moon Monster has cut a crescent into the belly of his third summer victim. Humans are patriotically slaughtering each other in Somalia, Angola, Eritria, Morocco, Chad, along the Euphrates—when the heat reaches 120 degrees, they suspend the fighting—in the South Atlantic, Indochina. Belfast and Beirut are doing their usual bit for population control.

In Venice, it's thought which is murderous. Wooden shutters are kept shuttered. As much time as possible is spent indoors, in the few air-conditioned bars and restaurants. The one air-conditioned theater is hotter than the street. People walk on the shady side of the *calli,* duck into the always cool churches. "You see why religion's lasted," George tells Bug. As for eating outdoors, much of the eating is done by a new breed of gnat. "Shrewd buggers," says George. "They give you the soup course, then you're theirs."

Heat, gnats and George's complaints can't kill Venice. Bug loves it.

II

Bug's new friend, the Queen—what would they make of that in Willsville?—said to her, "Why are you in this hell?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With her other new, middle-aged friend, Betsy, the sculptress, Bug had come to see the Queen in the Municipal Hospital next to *San Giovanni e Paulo, San Zanipolo,* as they called it in Venice.

"I love Venice, Your Majesty," says Bug.

Says Betsy, "She's with George Share, Serena. You remember George Share."

"I remember nothing."

"I know it's very hot," said Bug. "But it doesn't bother me. Everything is beautiful."

The Queen's black eyes look at her as if unsure where she stops and the chair beside her begins. "You're probably a pretty girl. It won't last."

George will not visit the Queen. Like so much in Venice, she is "out of date, superfluous, irrelevant. An affront. A front. A facade in front of that death machine of a hospital. You might as well go straight to the cemetery. The Queen's too stupid to kill. She stands for generations of organized theft."

"She's human," says Bug. "Not a symbol. You can't be a symbol if you don't have your country anymore."

Betsy is the Queen's dearest, her only friend. The Queen telephones her many times a day. "Betsy can I come see you?"

"I won't be here, Serena. I have to go to Cipriani's." (Or the Lido. Or Milan.) Betsy tells Bug that last week the Queen telephoned her at midnight to say that she'd committed suicide. "I asked her if she were feeling better. She said she wanted me to come over. 'Can you wait till morning, Serena?' 'Depends when it comes.' She's so far gone she sometimes makes sense."

"She must be very grateful to you, Betsy."

"She's not grateful to anyone. She was brought up to think her simple existence gratifies people."

Sunk in the gray sheets of her hospital bed, the Queen drinks iced tea from a thermos sent across Venice from Harry's Bar twice a day. She says, "The last time I was in this hospital I caught gangrene. I had to go to London

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to be cured." From a gold pillbox she pours saccharine tablets into the thermos. "The doctor says I can drink six glasses a day." Her voice is oracular; it's hard to tell if something is a joke or an official announcement. "I live on tea and boiled potatoes." These are also brought from Harry's Bar. "How do you like this room? It's the only air-conditioned room in the hospital."

"It's awful," says Betsy. Except for a crucifix behind the Queen's bed the walls are bare. "Even the view is awful. That's hard to find in Venice." Out the dirty window are a few hundred yards of ceramic roof tiles.

The Queen says, "I've seen all I need to see of this world. Views are nothing to me."

The Queen's heavy nose, large black eyes and crimson lips are like exiles in her pallid skin. Her nightgown too looks out of place, a fragile, embroidered silk on her elephant-thick flesh.

Bug wonders if she could've ever stirred anyone. "Could I ever look like this?"

"Do you want this, Betsy?" The Queen hands her a paperback, on whose jacket a nude beauty crawls under a musketeer's whip. "I don't like it. I read it twice."

"No, Serena. I don't read that stuff."

"What else is there? But it's uninteresting. And the story's too complicated."

Betsy tells Bug the Queen isn't up to following anything more complicated than the *Daily Mail.* "She's a second grader in five languages."

"Poor thing."

"She can't go anywhere anymore. They have orders not to let her in."

"Why?"

"She makes scenes. She steals. Her purse is filled with stolen toilet paper."

"Poor Queen."

Abandoned by everyone who counted in her life—royal father dead of a bite from his pet monkey before her birth, royal husband dead from a combination of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reality and booze, son publishing articles in *Figaro* about her incapacity, Venetian countesses who, in her presence, used to fall to their knees, turning away from her in the streets—the Queen is as isolated as a blood stain on a ball gown. She writes royal cousins for money. "Dearest Serena," they write, "We understand that you are well provided for."

During World War II, a teenage princess, Serena crawled in mud under barbed wire to escape partisan guns, hid for days in woods and shepherd's huts, rode in freezing weather across wild rivers, and, after terrible weeks, arrived in London to be nursed back to health by Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle George. Money gone, jewels lost, without brains, beauty or any education but what made her superfluous, she was as forlorn as refugees from the camps. Her aunt and uncle helped her marry a kingdomless king: she became queen of a country in which she'd never set foot. After the war, she and the little king rocketed through the world's capitals, spending and rioting, smashing champagne bottles on hotel walls, spilling caviar on Persian carpets. Drunk half the nights of their married lives, they sold wedding tiaras, necklaces and silver services to pay the bills. The king, well-spoken in five languages, got a job as a salesman in Paris, but all he thought of was his lost kingdom and the exiles who rallied round his little body. No wonder he filled it with booze. He felt himself a stamp that no longer franked letters, a bodiless head, helpless with a helpless wife, as useless as a human being could be.

A son was born. English cousins provided nurses, then boarding schools. When the king died, the Queen moved to her mother's house in Venice, and, when *she* died, lawyers and friends stole her clothes and jewels. (Betsy had seen them for sale in Venetian shops.) The palazzo was sold for a pittance, half of which went to lawyers. Royal cousins put her affairs in the hands of a lawyer who gave her a hundred pounds a day, and kept the rest to pay her bills. The Queen could spend thou-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sands in an hour. Once, she'd bought a ten thousand pound necklace from a woman in the street. Harrod's was a minefield: she couldn't pass it without running up a fortune. The Queen no longer stayed at the Connaught, the Ritz, Hassler's and the Gritti. She declined to the Dorchester and the Europa, then to the Bauer and Sonesta Arms, from there to *pensioni* and, finally, to a hot attic apartment in the Palazzo Ticci.

III

Pablo del Plunko.

George and Bug's second week here, he'd come up to their table, passing out flyers for his performance, a small, hairy man in a Tirolian blouse ripped at hair-haloed nipples. Golden knickers inadequately covered his southern zone. Discolored gouts of rear end appeared in the interstice between pants and blouse. Sandals exposed his purple, knobby feet. He was preceded by, stayed with and left behind a puissant fragrance, "Week-old fish and stale brick" was Share's analysis.

Staring at their pasta he announced, "I enact poems." Bug invited him to join them. In the next half hour forty thousand lira worth of pasta, fish, *fegato veneziano,* fruit, cheese and tarts were shoveled past his carious teeth, several thousand were sprayed over the table. When the check arrived, he reached into his golden knickers and came up with a thousand lira note. This he presented to Share as if endowing an institute. "This should cover mine." When George paid the check, del Plunko objected. "Tip like a *signore,* not like an American cheapo." He reached into George's billfold, extracted a ten thousand lira note and tucked it into Alvise the waiter's pocket.

So when George saw del Plunko heading their way across the campo, he bent toward Bug, Betsy and the Queen as if communicating an intimacy. No go. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rotten fish and stale brick odors were at the table. "Hello, friends. Eating alone?"

"We're not alone," said Share.

"Good foods?"

"We're almost finished."

"La condition humaine. Art alone makes it bearable." From a pocket of his filthy golden outfit del Plunko unfolded a flyer which read *"Recitazione:* Pablo del Plunko." "Tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow?" says the Queen.

"Campo San Stefano. By the *Caca Libri* statue. Del Plunko will recite Trakl, Huidobro, Montale, Ibsen. In original. Del Plunko's Norwegian is perfection. Huidobro he does with Santiago dialection. A marvel of art." He looks for the waiter, snaps his fingers. "Alvise. *Subito."* He plopped down between Bug and Betsy. Alvise, a scowler, looks interrogatively at Share, who shrugs surrender. Del Plunko orders, *"Zuppa e fettuccini bolognese. Poi, vediamo."*

"We will have to leave you," says Share. Uselessly; del Plunko addresses the ladies. "In Amsterdam del Plunko brought five hundred spectators to ecstasy. In Brussels he was not permitted to stop. Euro-TV is on its knees for a del Plunko Hour. *Rifiuto.* Del Plunko does not transmit *elettricamente.* He must be listened in the flesh. Media is zero for del Plunko. Del Plunko is his own media."

Betsy had told them that del Plunko was in the *Gazzettino* office every day bombarding them with publicity handouts, furious that they had neither advertised nor reviewed his performances. His only appearance in the paper came after a performance Frothingham had reported to her. "People opened windows and yelled, 'Shut up,' and 'Drop dead.' One man said if he showed up again he'd put cement in his mouth. Finally, someone felled him with a dead rat."

Share said, "We're busy tomorrow."

"Your business is not good for my business," said del Plunko.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I am free," said the Queen.

"I too," said del Plunko. "*Gratuit.* No charge. I know that is important for Americans."

"I am not American," said the Queen.

"That is something for you," said del Plunko. "Ah. *Zuppa.*" Alvise left a deep bowl of soup which del Plunko tipped into his throat. Much of it gullied down his chin into his chest hair. "Del Plunko exists on the contributions of patrons. *Ammiratori.*"

"Maybe we can make it, George," said Bug. "We're poetry lovers. Do you recite American poets, Mr. del Plunko? Wallace Stevens? Sylvia Plath?"

"No women," said del Plunko. "Women do not transmit."

"Pound? Hecht? Justice? Ashbery?"

"English is poor for poetry. Ugly consonants, long vowels. The language is wrong, top and bottom. No reflexivities, no *'ne,'* no *'en.'* no *'se.'* Where is the *darum?* No inturning. That's why there are no English poets. Spanish, a wonderful garden. Góngora, Lope, Jiménez. Italian, an orchard. Marino, Zanzotto, Montale, Carducci. Bulgarian. Ah, Bulgarian. That's language for poetry. Ukrainian, Albanian, Montenegran, Dutch. Even French has some poets. Hugo, Sully Prudhomme, Adolf Montégut. English is a poetic cemetery. I know the literature to perfection. I have performed it. John Gower, Erasmus Darwin, Oren Metzenbaum. I illustrate for you." At which he crooked his right arm like a hairy bar in front of his chest, threw back his starved child's head with the mustard-colored eyes and began intoning, moaning. Forks clattered, diners looked up in shock. Now and then words broke out of del Plunko's moan, some surely English: "Boil . . . fowl . . . sky . . . teatime." Del Plunko stood, head turned toward the dark campo. The words rumbled, roared. In the campo, playing children stopped playing, walkers became gawkers; from the bars, drinkers carried glasses toward the trattoria. Del Plunko threw out his arms, then, bending back, clutched

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his throat, pounded his chest, twisted his body. His gold-trimmed buttocks shook. His feet, purple-knobbed, hairy, callous-tortured, left his sandals and pointed here and there in pedal emphasis. He stood where the moon was brightest, enraptured.

For eighty or ninety seconds Campo San Margherita wrapped itself around him. Then there was a hoarse cry, *"Basta!"* It came from Alvise, the waiter, who marched to the filthy troubadour, gripped his blouse and knickers, and threw him ten yards into the campo. Del Plunko stiffened and extended his arms cruciform. Once again he was hurled and this time fell, belly down, knickered buttocks to the moon. *"Filisteo,"* he screamed. Alvise drove his foot into the knickers. Spectators cheered. Kids hooted. A forkful of pasta landed in del Plunko's black hair. Alvise's foot worked the bard's ribs.

Out ran the Queen. She pushed Alvise away. "Stop," she commanded. "Off." She and Bug took the poet under his shoulders and lifted him. "Poor boy," she said. "Come with Serena. Don't mind them."

A crooked halo descended on del Plunko's head: the gnats had arrived.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

William Logan

Bad Dream

The room was airless and damp,
the sheets a skin of sweat.
The greasy feather pillow
curled like a postage stamp.

There had been the usual violence.
On the gray formica table,
a man in a toupee
gestured and grinned in silence

on the network evening news.
His eyes were pink as a rabbit's.
Behind him the evening sky
discolored like a bruise.

The signs lit up for bingo.
Along the dusty roadside
a shattered NO VACANCY flared
under a neon flamingo.

An ancient B-17,
red as tobacco barns,
rattled down the runway
reeking of kerosene.

It rose in hope and joy
over corn fields in smoke and flame,
but as it banked, an engine
dropped like a Tinkertoy.

Our Kyrie eleison.
Two mushroom clouds,
sad and white as milk,
boiled over the horizon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Caroline Finkelstein

Soup of the Evening

Very woman the tomato
cut up cool and floating in gumbo,
so rice the okra swans!

Spoons prowl the soup, poking flotsam:
prawns curled like sleepy czars
on slivered pepper beds.

Brew of salt and fruity
tutti: all the world is here sometimes
dancing on the surface

while underneath's an oiled mystery
of edgy corals. Grimed,
adjusting to the darkness,

the dreamer sticks, struck stubborn
in this diction. Almost wise
the sleeping. As in preparation

for the day, the glazed and shaky
flower-painted stone-worn bowl
whose very cracks still hold.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jim Elledge

Household Gods

Tuned to 104.6 on the FM
dial, the boom box purrs Golden
Oldies I jerk awake to. You
turn beside me, to me, but turning,
wind tighter into sleep. "I
think it's great," you mumble, each
syllable and breath an array of
totem wrapped in haze—a logo
constructed some finer place than
this, plumb-bob perfect by no
light but the dial's
red rectangle.
Horae lacrimae,
these hours strung midnight to 7:00's
alarm, each moment a stepping
stone across terrain where music
uncoils and rears to strike, where
wakefulness is goblin, pilgrim,
goblin again. The clutter of eras
packs each moment breathed,
each footprint left, while
Johnny Angel attends your heart like
those household gods Caesar's
Rome raised to block each
portal against barbarian, evil
eye, famine.
That land you stride through
stretches ahead, behind, buoyed between
lungs, nestled within the rib cage.
For me, it lies as uncharted as
those vast lands cartographers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fixed onto maps millenia ago, pastel
jigsaw pieces they labeled
Terra incognita, and where,
between each vaguely boundaried
blotch, they printed in their best
hand warnings to mariners then, after:
HERE, FRIEND, BE DRAGONS.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peter Schmitt

Friends with Numbers

"If you make friends with numbers,
you don't need any other friends."

*—**Shakuntala Devi,** math genius*

They are not hard to get to know:
6 and 9 keep changing their minds,
8 cuts the most graceful figure
but sleeps for an eternity,
and 7, lucky 7, takes
an arrow to his heart always.
5, halfway to somewhere, only
wants to patch his unicycle
tire, and 4, who'd like to stand for
something solid, has never had
two feet on the ground, yet flutters
gamely in the breeze like a flag.
3, for all his literary
accomplishments and pretensions
to immortality, is still
(I can tell you) not half the man
8 is asleep or awake. 1,
little 1. I know him better
than all the others, these numbers
who are all my friends. Only 2,
that strange smallest prime, can I count
as just a passing acquaintance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Divisible by only 1
and herself, she seems on the verge,
yet, of always coming apart.
And though she eludes me, swanlike,
though I'd love to know her better,
still I am fine, there are others,
many, I have friends in numbers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Three Poems by Kuroda Saburo

Laundry

I drink
make Yuri cry
get scared, lose heart
and skip work—

I've got no good points.
No pride
no shame,
a worthless drunk.

I could fault myself
in limitless ways—
standing up, sitting down
in the middle of this smallish, damp room—

I'm a useless fool.
Faltering
earnest
but at this point to whom could I complain?

Would anyone even nod
"I understand,"
or try to calm me
"It's all right, it's okay . . ."

Like the roadside beggar
raising high his voice—
"I am a beggar!"
Wretched world.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the middle of this damp, smallish room
I stand up precariously
and—quick—
gallop off to the washplace.

I clean little Yuri's undershirt
wash her shorts
in the washroom of the empty apartment
I challenge an unseen foe to combat.

The water
flows with a fierce sound—
the leaves in the treetops
nod faintly in the breeze.

Evening Glow

Like being where I shouldn't
this guilty conscience—
when
oh, why
did it lodge within me?
Wordless I watch
the faded evening glow, cloudlike
in the window of this late city train,
the sunset sky
the twilight treetops
the ashen buildings wave upon wave—
Shadows,
beautiful shadows.
Beautiful shadows of ugly things.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Three O'clock Autumn Afternoon

On a bench by Shinobazu Pond
I sneak open my half-pint.
Little Yuri in her very best clothes
charges off across the white sand,
etches a circle in return.

Far away in a crazy voice a sea lion bellows:
"Kuakkuakkua!"
Little Yuri mimics it as she comes.
Three o'clock autumn afternoon—
on the far shore sparse figures amid crowds of ducks,

car horns faintly there in the distance—
all is distant.
Distant, like the world so distant
two shadows in line upon the white sand—
of a truant father and his little girl.

—translated from the Japanese
by Bruno Peter Navasky

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rocks and Whirlpools: Archibald MacLeish and Yvor Winters

Donald Hall

The Faces

Two of my teachers were Archibald MacLeish and Yvor Winters. From the 1930s into the 1960s, Mac Leish's poetic reputation flourished, but by the time he died in 1982, in his ninetieth year, the literary stock market had devalued him. On the other hand, Yvor Winters's poems were never popular. His eccentric and belligerent criticism drew attention away from his poems, which were sparse, spare and sometimes beautiful. The two men were unlike in a thousand ways. MacLeish's face was handsome, benign and horsey with a long upper lip; its expression was welcoming, friendly, confident, joshing. Winters's face denied itself expression, looked cold

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and impassive, which is just how Winters wished to look; he admired words like *cold* and *impassive.*

It will surprise no one that these appearances concealed their own opposites. Private, loyal, combative and passionate, Winters's rock-hardness formed the carapace of an anxious psyche; MacLeish's engulfing gregarious heartiness concealed a diffident spirit. Maybe everyone is rock, everyone is whirlpool. Although these men neither sank ships nor drowned sailors, each could be dangerous; at least, each embodied a danger. In memory's gallery I hang their faces—one sober, glaring, shaky with certainty; the other laughing and sturdy with self-doubt.

The Boylston Professor

One afternoon, when I was first his student, I had a conference with Archibald MacLeish scheduled for two o'clock. I knocked on the great oak door of Widener five minutes late—I am never late; it must have been deliberate—and, as I crossed the office to sit beside him, I heard him make loud boyish noises of regret. He told me, laughing, that I must *never* be late again. Just at two o'clock there'd been a knock on the door, and he had called out, "Come on in, Don, you old son of a bitch"—only it hadn't been me, but a stranger from the *Harvard Law Review*! He pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead, as if he were a high school student and the assistant principal had caught him smoking.

Two years before he became Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, MacLeish visited Harvard to read his poems in December of 1947. We took a close look at him. He resembled a college president with his stony features and high forehead. We knew his face not from anthologies of poetry—celebrity photographs had not reached Parnassus—but from newspapers and magazines. We knew the story: After Hotchkiss, Yale and service in World War I, he entered Harvard Law School,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then practiced with a prestigious Boston firm. But he broke the pattern: the young Bostonian professional, slated to make partner, chucked it all and moved to Paris in 1923 to join the lost generation and undertake the lives of a poet. When he returned to the United States in 1928 he was famous (as poets were famous in 1928) or notorious for "Ars Poetica" (1926): "A poem should not mean/but be" was quoted whenever journalists deplored (or praised) modern poetry. Two years later, *New Found Land* contained the best work he would ever do—including the sonorities of "You, Andrew Marvell":

> And here face down beneath the sun
> And here upon earth's noonward height
> To feel the always coming on
> The always rising of the night:

In 1933 *Conquistador* won him his first Pulitzer Prize. When Cleanth Brooks published *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* in 1939, one chapter gathered "Frost, MacLeish and Auden." It seems now like a sandwich with a strange filling—but taste, fifty years back, is *always* bizarre. Frost-MacLeish-Auden balanced one chapter devoted to Yeats and another to Eliot. Where were the other American poets of that time? Wallace Stevens turned up in the introduction among others with "claim to inclusion," namely Ezra Pound and Donald Davidson; William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore went unlisted.

Eight years later, when he read at Harvard, MacLeish had long since detached from his fellows of the lost generation. During the early depression years, he worked for Henry Luce's *Fortune*—rather, say, than writing for *The Nation.* After a year directing the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, he went to Washington in 1939 as Librarian of Congress, a Roosevelt appointment rewarding the poet gone public, Paris aesthete turned political. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

next year MacLeish wrote *The Irresponsibles,* an essay in which he attacked modern writers for insufficient awareness of the dangers to democracy. He contributed to speeches for the President and was appointed Assistant Secretary of State under Edward R. Stettinius in 1944. At the Senate hearings on his confirmation, he was ridiculed for his poetry, some of which sounded to conservatives not only obscure but leftish; the day was saved—as MacLeish told the story—when a senatorial supporter revealed that he had played football for Yale.

When Roosevelt died, Truman appointed James Byrnes Secretary of State and MacLeish left office. He had published little poetry during his Washington years, only *America Was Promises,* (1939), which served the patriotic cause. When he read at Harvard in 1947, beginning his return to poetry, he addressed a skeptical audience, reacting against the pious solidarity of the war years. But if we were cynical, we were also fascinated; if we looked askance at the smooth-faced, friendly figure that solemnly said its poems, we were also impressed by his eminence.

We were MacLeish's potential students when it was announced, a year or so later, that he had accepted the Boylston Professorship at Harvard. This Chair goes back to a time when "Rhetoric and Oratory" meant rhetoric and oratory, when public speaking loomed large on campus. With MacLeish's appointment the position was confirmed as a precinct of creative writing. (Incumbent is Seamus Heaney, who followed Robert Fitzgerald.) Institutional Harvard had earlier showed little interest in hiring writers in permanent positions. When Vladimir Nabokov was put up for a professorship in Slavic, the linguist Roman Jakobson suggested appointing an elephant to teach zoology. But in the late 1940s Harvard Square pulsed with artistic energy. Especially the theater thrived; some veterans broke loose from the Harvard Dramatic Club, took over the Brattle Theater and put on a series of excellent, mainly Shakespearean productions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There were poets in the neighborhood and MacLeish's appointment suggested that Harvard might remember when Longfellow and another Lowell taught there.

The neighborhood: undergraduates during my four years included Robert Bly, Adrienne Rich (Harvard and Radcliffe took classes together), John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Peter Davison, L.E. Sissman and Frank O'Hara. The novelist John Hawkes was another student, and John Updike arrived as a freshman in my senior year. Robert Creeley quit Harvard in 1947 to raise chickens in Littleton, New Hampshire—and we met when he came south, a long conversation at Gordon Cairnie's Grolier Bookshop. If one sat on Gordon's sofa long enough, one sat haunch to haunch with the poets of the western world. I met Richard Eberhart there, Conrad Aiken, Allen Curnow from New Zealand. When he came to town, T.S. Eliot always dropped by. At the Grolier one encountered graduate students and spouses: Richard Wilbur, Ruth and Walter Stone, Alison Lurie. Outside Harvard, Cambridge and Boston filled with poets: Robert Frost lived beside the Square fall and spring; John Holmes, teaching at Tufts, lived nearby; so did Samuel French Morse and John Malcolm Brinnin. In the suburbs, Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin began writing. W.S. Merwin spent a year in the area, as did Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. When we started the Poets' Theater in 1950, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara and Robert Bly gathered in the Cambridge living room of Dick and Betty Eberhart. A catalyst to the Poets' Theater was Archibald MacLeish who had written verse for radio and theater.

With MacLeish's appointment we learned that he would teach a writing course the next autumn. Bly and I took it. At our first meeting, we sat around an oval table at the top of Widener next to MacLeish's office. I remember encountering the famous face, as MacLeish strode into class carrying books and papers, open-countenanced and friendly. How anxious he must have been, beginning a new life at the age of fifty-seven. He talked about the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life of writing, and in his nervousness he spoke not of Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Dos Passos but of Ernest, Scott and Dos.

Despite his celebrity, he needed our admiration; therefore we withheld it. At our first meeting, a naval veteran characterized something MacLeish said as "middle-class." Sensing in that vulnerable face his injury, twenty-one-year-old sharks tasted blood. Someone else took the offensive at the second class; at the third meeting of the class, it was I who led the assault. My pretext was small enough: talking about modern writers, MacLeish used a hackneyed figure, as we all do in speech, talking about "Joyce's world," "Faulkner's world" and "Yeats's world." I attacked the usage as solipsistic; there was only one world, I explained. MacLeish was taken aback, probably by an acerbic tone more than by force of logic; he stumbled trying to answer. When I skipped class next week, Bly told me that MacLeish was disappointed because he had prepared a refutation of my argument, bringing in Aristotle for support. After another week or two, MacLeish stopped class meetings and met us only in conference.

Or there was one more group meeting during our year-long class, a Christmas party at the MacLeishes' rented house in Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill. We met Ada MacLeish for the first time. The occasion was generous, and pleasant enough; I remember one negative moment. MacLeish suggested that each poet recite a poem. Bly recited "The Puritan on His Honeymoon." Someone asked me to say, "The Poet as Social Worker." It was not a poem I would have chosen, tetrameter couplets that satirized preachy political poets, written not about MacLeish but in general reaction to popular front pieties. When I said it at Louisburg Square I remember MacLeish—author of *The Irresponsibles* and *America Was Promises*—staring at the floor with his mouth a straight line. "An interesting social document," he said.

It was remarkable, and typical of the man, that he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remained kind to me. I spent hours in conference with him, manuscripts spread over his desk. He concentrated on *ear,* which was fine with me because it was sound that wedded me to poetry in the first place. To all of us he emphasized ways of working. In class meeting, he had praised the habit of writing every day on a schedule. It didn't matter at what hour you worked; what mattered was working every day. I tried out his advice. Every day after lunch I carried my typewriter to a cubicle in Lamont Library and worked two hours on my verses. The next year I began rising at six, walking to the Square with paper and pencil to occupy a booth at an all-night cafeteria called Albiani's, writing for two hours while drinking black coffee from plastic mugs. Then I walked back to Eliot House and breakfast.

In the culture I was born to, *work* is a golden syllable. My Connecticut grandfather, who stopped school at ten and labored a fourteen-hour day, sang the praises of *woik-woik-woik*—as the southern New Englander said it; in New Hampshire, it was *wuk-wuk-wuk* that the old farmers praised. I grew up knowing that we work for the night is coming when we work no more. Then one day in conference, MacLeish remarked that I was lazy. Oh, my indignation! I assaulted him with testimony of hours bent over the typewriter, I numbered pages piled and drafts redrafted. But he had discovered a vulnerable place, which amused him, and he continued to probe it. Although it became a joke, his accusation never lost its potency. In later years, whenever I saw him, I overwhelmed him with figures of labor; he would hear me out, as I listed prodigies, until he laughed at my need to justify myself.

On the other hand, he was right; at least, he was right when I was young. Once Henry Moore told about sculptors who tap-tap-tap'd at stone day and night, twelve hours a day if you like and were still lazy: they put in their hours and withheld their spirits. When I was young, I tricked myself with a busy laziness, as with my project for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MacLeish. Beginning the course, he assigned us all a major project. We could write whatever we liked—poems, stories—and he would read what we showed him; but we were each to undertake one long enterprise which we were to name in the autumn and complete in the spring. After all, MacLeish was a poet of large undertakings. The novelists each wrote a novel; but in 1949 poets wrote rhymed lyrics, so that we needed to go afield for our projects. Robert Bly wrote a long narrative in blank verse. My project was a rhymed play called *The Minstrel's Progress,* adapted without permission from a children's book by Eleanor Farjeon, *Martin Pippin in the Apple Orchard.* Most speeches were octosyllabic couplets; there were love songs in varied rhymed stanzas; one character ranted in Skeltonics; I invented a wizard who spoke nonsense that parodied Hart Crane. It played one night in the spring of my senior year, with Harry Levin, Richard Eberhart, Richard Wilbur and Archibald MacLeish sitting in the front row. Popular acclaim has never brought it back. *The Minstrel's Progress* contained many lines, many rhymes and many meters—but it was lazy.

His notions of professionalism and seriousness, writing on a schedule every day, were useful to me, trying to grow up as a writer. I'm sure they were useful to others. The young writer may glory in his amateur status, improvising out of wit and love for poetry, not to mention self-love, but if we will grow up as writers, we must learn to settle into daily labor. MacLeish was helpful and continually kind. Then why did I withhold devotion or even gratitude? I was intolerant of him—impatient, quick to find fault—and I was not alone. Other students and colleagues mocked him, and among literary people who did not know him, the index of contempt ran high. When Dylan Thomas in a London pub recollected his visit to Harvard, he said he had liked everybody except MacLeish, because MacLeish had been in government. Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry,* forthright in praise and blame, refers to the "bland, even smug attitude" of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," disliking the poem as we dislike a complacent acquaintance. Annoyance with this agreeable fellow turns up everywhere. Looking at traces of correspondence between MacLeish and Ezra Pound, we find Pound abusive. Edmund Wilson showed contempt on many occasions, devastatingly when he published "The Omelet of A. MacLeish" in *The New Yorker,* a parody that included critical grounds for contempt. It begins, using the marginal notes (out of Coleridge) that MacLeish was known for:

And the mist: and the rain in the west: and the wind steady:
There were elms in that place: and graven inflexible laws:
Men of Yale: and the shudder of Tap Day: the need for a man to make headway

MacLeish breaks an egg for his omelet

Winning a way through the door in the windowless walls:
And the poems that came easy and sweet with a blurring of Masefield
(The same that I later denied): a young man smooth but raw

Eliot alarmed me at first: but my later abasement:
And the clean sun of France: and the freakish but beautiful fashion:
Striped bathhouses bright on the sand: Anabase and The Waste Land:

He puts plovers eggs and truffles into his omelet.

These and the Cantos of Pound: O how they came pat!
Nimble at other men's arts how I picked up the trick of it:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Yorker's editor, Harold Ross, ran into MacLeish at the Algonquin just after Wilson's parody appeared. Embarrassed, he could only mutter, "That must have hurt. That must have hurt."

The parody does not mimic *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928) but the cadences and manners of *Conquistador* (1932), with its Ur-style that derives from the French *Anabase* of St.-John Perse. MacLeish was a derivative poet, and his imitativeness partly accounts both for his unpopularity and for his popularity. When we like a poet, we want *more,* and other poets are always ready to produce the *more* that we want. MacLeish's *The Pot of Earth* (1925), three years after *The Waste Land,* supplies an epigraph from *The Golden Bough* and uses section titles: "The Sowing of the Dead Corn" and "The Carrion Spring."

> We are having a late spring, we are having
> The snow in April, the grass heaving
> Under the wet snow, the grass
> Burdened and nothing blossoms, grows
> In the fields nothing and the garden fallow;
> And now the wild birds follow
> The wild birds and the thrush is tame.
> Well, there is time still, there is time.

This tenth-carbon Eliot comes from MacLeish's third book.

On the other hand, his best work made its own noises, and we must judge poets by their best work. Anger against an artist seldom reflects disinterested judgment. MacLeish's success offended people for a number of reasons other than his imitativeness: prolificness is always subject to innuendo (as Joyce Carol Oates can testify) and MacLeish published books in 1924, 1925, 1926, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1932—and two in 1933. Then, his success seemed in excess of deserts, which angers everybody, as he won Pulitzers in 1933, 1952 and 1958—the first two for poetry, the third for *J.B.* Then also, he appeared to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be comfortable, never a patrician but accepted in American-patrician circles, with his friend Dean Acheson as exhibit number one; we prefer our artists poor; we resented his ability to pull out of law and live in Paris without employment; we resented the house at Conway with its servants and the winters in Antigua. Edmund Wilson's "Omelet," for all the justice of its complaint, sneers like the Harvard undergraduate's "middle-class." We were intolerant because he was famous, derivative, rich, popular, lucky, prolific and diffident. Sometimes he seemed to write too easily, in a thin language—small matter spread lightly over pages of pleasant diction. As I make this complaint, I notice that I accuse him of a busy laziness, of putting in hours and withholding spirit. Do I merely play turnabout? Maybe he discovered in me a fault he condemned in himself: it would not be the first such occasion in history.

Sometimes MacLeish wrote beautifully. Setting aside the derivative work, we can take pleasure in the sound and feeling of:

> And over Sicily the air
> Still flashing with the landward gulls
> And loom and slowly disappear
> The sails above the shadowy hulls
>
> And Spain go under and the shore
> Of Africa the gilded sand
> And evening vanish and no more
> The low pale light across that land
>
> Nor now the long light on the sea:
>
> And here face downward in the sun
> To feel how swift how secretly
> The shadow of the night comes on . . .

We can admire the two-sentence sonnet, "The End of the World":

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quite unexpectedly as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb—
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover.
There with vast wings across the canceled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.

This poem provides pleasures of skill, like watching a juggler in the circus described; but the vision of emptiness goes beyond mere skill, and if Madame Sossman requires us to remember Madame Sosostris, MacLeish's ventriloquism is harmless. Or we can remember lines of elegy:

Between the mutinous brave burning of the
leaves
And winter's covering of our hearts with his
deep snow
We are alone: there are no evening birds: we
know
The naked moon: the tame stars circle at our
eaves.

It is the human season. On this sterile air
Do words outcarry breath; the sound goes on
and on.
I hear a dead man's cry from autumn long since
gone.

I cry to you beyond upon this bitter air.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dead brother Kenneth, airman in the Great War, foreshadowed MacLeish's dead son Kenneth fifty years further on. The poet's best work is elegiac, with a special rage for emptiness, for blank faces at the edge of the void. While we fear or dread annihilation, these lines make their music. From time to time in his later work he reached this note again, and made poems less noticed but equal to his best. W.J. Bate read "Winter is Another Country" at the Harvard memorial service in 1982.

If autumn would
End! If the sweet season,
The latenight in the tall trees would
End! If the fragrance, the odor of
Fallen apples, dust on the road,
Water somewhere near, the scent of
Water touching me; if this would end
I could endure the absence in the night,
The hands beyond the reach of hands, the name
Called out and never answered with my name:
The image seen but never seen with sight.
I could endure this all
If autumn ended and the cold light came.

Winters in California

When I arrived in Palo Alto, September of 1953, to begin a year's fellowship at Stanford, I was to call Yvor Winters. On the telephone I met the unanticipated man. The deep voice inquired: "Do you have enough money?" I told him we were all right. "Come over tonight," he said, "and I'll cook a big steak." I was surprised, after the severity of his figure in his criticism, to engage an affable provider who invited us for a California cookout. We followed directions to Portola Drive in Los Altos. When he met us at the door, I recognized the face by moments of the prose style: fixed and somber, without volatility of expression, like his voice that seldom

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

varied pitch but retained its blue timbre; and I met the unaffable side: "You come from Harvard," said Winters when we stepped inside, "where they think I'm lower than the carpet." A moment later he added: "Do you realize that you will be ridiculed, the rest of your life, because you have studied a year with me?"

At Oxford I had met a poet from Stanford, student of Yvor Winters, who told me about the Stanford Fellowships in Creative Writing. I applied, sending poems as required, and forgot about it. In April or May came the letter inviting me to spend the next year at Stanford on the *dolce* stipend of two thousand dollars. Therefore, I put graduate school off for a year, and looked toward study with Yvor Winters, of whom I had been aware for as long as a decade. When I spent my allowance on poetry books in my early teens, James Laughlin helped the budget by providing a pamphlet every month for a dollar hardback, fifty cents paper. I first came upon Yvor Winters when he was a Poet of the Year with *The Giant Weapon* in 1943. New Directions was my provider then, publishing Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams; with the help of Laughlin's annuals and pamphlets I discovered Gertrude Stein, Robert Duncan, the prose poem, Kenneth Rexroth, Henry Miller, Surrealism—and Yvor Winters, conservative dogmatist of logic, St. Thomas and metrics.

As an undergraduate I read Winters's criticism when he collected his first three books into an omnibus volume called *In Defense of Reason.* Although he was first and always a poet, in the forties and fifties he was more famous as a critic—because of his belligerence, intransigence, and eccentricity; his learning and intelligence were largely overlooked, in favor of these more colorful qualities. I had been reading new critics: Eliot the forerunner, I.A. Richards, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and R.P. Blackmur who provided the model for my undergraduate essays. Ransom in *The New Criticism* applied the label to Winters, but surely Winters stood to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

side of all canons of accepted taste and behavior. As he acknowledged when we met in 1953, people ridiculed him.

When we find a critic who prefers Robert Bridges to Gerard Manley Hopkins, we treat the discovery as a gift to our amour propre. It became standard in the forties and fifties to allude to Winters as the man who called T. Sturge Moore a greater poet than William Butler Yeats—although the alluders by and large knew nothing of T. Sturge Moore. Winters had read everybody—and Winters had distinct and unorthodox opinions. His first critical books appeared in 1937 and 1938, but essays or reviews had appeared from the early twenties on—many in *Poetry,* later in *The Kenyon Review* and especially in *Hound and Horn. Primitivism and Decadence* (1937) told in its subtitle what it attacked: "A Study of American Experimental Poetry." *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938) took care of the predecessors: Hawthorne, Cooper, Melville, Poe, Very and Emerson, Dickinson and Henry James. In 1943 came *The Anatomy of Nonsense,* where chapters carried double titles like "T.S. Eliot, or the Illusion of Reaction." By this time, readers understood who provided the reality of reaction.

There were great critical quarrels when I was too young to follow them. In that "Age of Criticism," doubtless some critics merely enjoyed argument, but for Winters his convictions carried the weight of life and death, or at least sanity and madness. Some critics would stop short of facing a firing squad rather than recant an opinion but Winters was never so lily-livered. Once he and Allen Tate quarreled bitterly over editorial policy at *Hound and Horn;* Winters enjoyed claiming that Tate boarded a train in Nashville with a ticket for California, packing only a brace of duelling pistols and two bottles of bourbon. Winters told how the bourbon ran out in Texas and Tate turned back to Tennessee.

The summer after Oxford, my wife Kirby and I spent a month in the eastern United States. I found my old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

copy of *In Defense of Reason* and read it through—with a dry mouth. It was one thing to read Winters, taking pleasure in his intelligence and condescending to his judgments; it was another to imagine him face to face. In the environs of Cambridge I asked people about him. Most of them knew him only by his essays—and wished me luck. Richard Wilbur had met him; I asked what Winters was *like* . . . "Well," said Dick carefully, "I asked him why he raised Airedales. He said, 'Because they can kill any other dog.' " In hot September, my pregnant wife and I drove from Connecticut to California, arriving early one afternoon, exhausted, and found the rooms in Menlo Park that we had engaged from Oxford. From that first night with Winters I remember not only his generosity and aggression but also how he introduced his Airedales—the great Black Jack above all—and the flora of California; he loved dwelling on the abundance of vine and flower. He showed me a pomegranate, then split the fruit and demonstrated how to eat it; the New Englander took lessons in California. Winters was friendly, warm and fatherly; Winters was pugnacious and nuts.

That night we also talked about the year ahead. For the fellowship, I was required to enroll as a graduate student, but the only course I needed to take for credit was Winters's workshop. I would take no other courses, but would write poems and read ad libitum. Also I would hear Winters lecture, for he required fellows to audit one of his courses each term. Why had he spent his life erecting this edifice if he didn't want others to inhabit it? I planned to take temporary rooms there; doubtless, I daydreamed that I would argue him out of his unreasonable prejudice against William Butler Yeats.

In eight months, I learned more about poetry from Winters than I learned from any other teacher; mostly I learned practical or writerly things, finally rejecting his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

theology but taking him as model for parish work. Winters revised my notions of prosody, overturning the structure I had worked up from the age of seventeen, and which I had recently applied in an Oxford thesis. From Winters I learned notions of diction that forbade hack metaphors of common speech—monosyllabic verbs like *dart, cup, churn, shield* and *etch;* disyllables like *harbor, mirror, cradle, echo*—quasi-tropes that weaken the language even of good poets on a bad day. Winters had an Airedale's nose for language. In our writing class, if one of us committed a cliché, he would lean back in his chair, gaze toward the ceiling with a soulful expression, and intone with plush sonority: "The pine tree, like a lonely sentinel, stood etched against the sky."

In winter quarter, he taught the English short poem; we studied Thomas Wyatt, Ben Jonson, Fulke Greville, Barnabe Googe, George Herbert . . . We concentrated on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century lyrics, then dwindled through romanticism toward Robert Bridges, T. Sturge Moore and Thomas Hardy. We studied the poems which were the fixed stars of Winters's astronomy, and the classes were dense with his knowledge and passion, his intelligence and authority. One day a graduate student spoke up in favor of George Gordon, Lord Byron; the young man never spoke again. I suppose the English lyric was his best course, but it was the autumn course from which I learned most, because it was the first and because I resisted it the most. He called it "The Theory and the Practice of the Criticism of Poetry"—Winters was master of the light touch—but he might have named it "The Systematic Destruction of the Collected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Butler Yeats." When he assaulted Hopkins first, I held back—out of ignorance, diffidence, and to save myself for the next poet. When it came to Yeats, each day Winters would go through several poems, beautifully reading each aloud, then shredding it into excelsior; my defense followed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Digression: Winters was a wonderful reader, and when I describe the way he read aloud, I will touch on a paradox at Winters's center, maybe the same Heraclitan reversal, or appointment in Samarra, that lives at the center of any passionate advocate: *He did the opposite of what he claimed to do.* Reading poetry, his voice was deep, furry, rich and intense. He kept a level pitch, refusing (as he thought) dramatic or musical enhancement. He read this way on principle: the words themselves should do the work, and not anybody's performance. Yet when Winters read aloud, reading Yeats or Jonson or Hart Crane or even a student, his voice was thrilling. It was *magic,* to use a metaphor that would have made him vomit; Winters's dark, hairy timbre was solemn, bottomless, convincing, *romantic;* he was a performer as compelling as Dylan Thomas, whom he despised for performing.

Everyone writing about Winters encounters such contradictions, dazzling not because they are unusual for humankind but because Winters exemplified them to an extreme degree. These contradictions imply no hypocrisy; they speak of conflict which makes energy. Winters's internal contradictions account for his power; within him one fierce brother raged against the force of the other's protest and decision. Both brothers were adamant, indefatiguable, unconquerable, wrong and right.

When Winters finished reading a poem by Yeats he delivered a brief, incisive, devastating, line-by-line analysis of its bad thinking, bad writing and bad morals along with sentimental, dishonest, corrupt feeling. As I sat amid the splintered wreckage of a poem I had long admired, Winters would turn with a restrained leer and ask, "What does Mr. Hall have to say?"

Certainly my presence—my continual defeat—was pedagogically useful. Every now and then, Mr. Hall had nothing to say; mostly I tried reassembling the poem's pieces. I knew the poems well and enjoyed argument.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Winters never interrupted me, but puffed on his curved pipe and looked downward until I had finished. Then he would destroy my argument—quickly, item by item—as he had originally destroyed the poem. He was the best arguer I ever argued with, shameless perhaps but rigorous and devastating. The case rested and the jury never deliberated. He was Perry Mason; I was the DA—except that he was prosecutor not defender and my client was always guilty as charged. I cannot quote from our confrontations. I recall that he skipped over "The Gyres"—in one quarter he couldn't destroy everything—and I brought him back. Not one of Yeats's best poems, "The Gyres" contains lines I chant to myself walking or driving alone:

> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out.
> Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;
> Empedocles has thrown all things about;
> Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;
> We that look on but dance in tragic joy.

His comment (not angrily but smugly: he *had* me) was simply: "Ancient Pistol." I agreed; I *like* Ancient Pistol, as he thunders out Shakespeare's pastiche of Marlowe's Tamberlaine bombast; I like Marlowe.

And I like Yeats. Defeated in argument, day after day, I never lost my love for Yeats's poems. Of course Winters reached and modified me: I discriminated more, found Yeats sometimes a liar, sometimes practitioner of a bardic tone that disguised a sentimental or formulaic resolution. When Winters disliked a poet, he was accurate in naming the faults—but I think he often exaggerated the effect or extent of the faults, as in his essay on Robert Frost. My love for Yeats remained whole if dented.

Experience with Winters left my romantic standards and tastes largely unshaken. He persuaded me of the excellence of some poets I had not known—Greville, for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

instance—but he never dislodged Keats. I think of a story about taste in literature, an anecdote that MacLeish told. When Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor made *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at Smith College, they visited the MacLeishes' Uphill Farm for a weekend; Burton's brother, whose name was Jenkins, accompanied them, and the two Welshmen recited poems they knew by heart. Upon learning that MacLeish was unaware of the poems of R.S. Thomas, the brothers outdid each other reciting lyrics by the contemporary Welsh parson. Then Burton and Jenkins quarreled over Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Jenkins said it was a bad poem: disgusting, awful; Burton praised it: magnificent, superb. Jenkins repeated that it was nothing at all—whereupon Burton commanded silence and spoke the whole poem, perfect from first syllable to last. MacLeish told me that Burton's recitation was a great performance, and when he ended, drawing the last syllable out, the still air shook with the memory and mystery of his speaking. Then, into the silence, brother Jenkins spoke his word of critical reason: *"See?"*

Winters's writing class, that year, was two women and two men. At the beginning of each class Winters asked for manuscripts of our poems. For a few minutes we sat in silence as Winters read, his eyes expressionless as he scanned our lines. When he was done, he read each poem aloud and passed the manuscripts for silent reading. He asked our opinions, then delivered his own compact, small essay on each poem. Our errors allowed him to touch on everything: metrics, rhythm, rhyme, grammar, diction—and of course bad thinking or avoidance of thought in the name of emotion. He was a quick study and he left nothing out; there was no ambiguity in his judgment nor doubt about its provenance. At first I brought in some old poems from a collected works accumulated piecemeal over the years. Old poems fared poorly. What was the point of my presence, if I were not to be made over? I learned about my sentimentalities; I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

became aware of slack thinking, corrupt figures and prosodic licentiousness. I started bringing only new poems to class.

Like many writing teachers, he did not wish to teach out of our endeavors only. He brought into class some poems that he loved, that did not fit his other courses. He went through Valéry's "Ebauche d'un Serpent" and "Le Cimetière Marin," as well as poems by Baudelaire and Rimbaud; he said them aloud, with an accent that sounded just fine to me; he would paraphrase, giving alternatives, almost like *The Poem Itself.* Under his influence, I translated a Corbière for his class. Also, he praised a few contemporary Americans. From Winters I first heard of Stanley Kunitz. Berryman's "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" came out in *Partisan Review* while I was at Stanford, and Winters dismissed it out of hand. There were contemporaries whom I admired, whom I praised to Winters; I got nowhere advocating Wilbur and Lowell. I liked Theodore Roethke, whom Winters had praised for his first book, *Open House* (1941)—well-made poems in narrow quatrains like Louise Bogan's. When *The Lost Son* (1948) moved into surrealism or nonsense in its title poem, Winters hurled Roethke headlong. Because he had praised early Roethke, his contempt for the fallen angel was devastating.

That December I was Christmas shopping when Roethke telephoned out of the blue; he talked with my wife for an hour. He had seen a poem of mine in the *Hudson Review* and liked it—which gratified him because I had praised him in an article I had written in England. Over the telephone he was talkative and expansive, suggesting that he might bring me to the University of Washington for a poetry reading. A month or two later I had a note from him saying that the department's budget had run out, and he couldn't afford to pay for it himself; the Aga Khan phase was over for this year, he said. I found out later the blood chemistry of his enthusiasm: the telephone call had come from a hospital where he underwent treatment for mania.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the spring I went to hear Roethke read his poems in San Francisco at the opening of the Poetry Center. I loved the reading. He was funny, outsized, performing and showing off in ways that would have confirmed Winters's worst notions. He did routines and gags, a shy man's way of showing off. At one point he said, "I understand there are spies here from Police Commissioner Winters" and I jumped in my seat.

Winters preferred my new poems to my old ones; I became a brief Wintersian. Twice a week I arrived early for writing class, in order to talk with him. Mostly when I knocked he was sitting at his desk reading poetry. His low, loud voice told me to come in, and when he saw me he put a bookmark in his book. He turned in his dilapidated morris chair to face me, and I tried things out on him, enjoying the forthright starch of his opinions. When I expressed some doubt about Robert Penn Warren's "Ballad of Billie Potts," I heard, "Red Warren can't write." We also joked. I liked seeing him laugh: his considerable belly jiggled. We worked a running gag about New England and California. One day he puffed at his pipe, deadpan, and wandered into a little speech: "Yes, that New England countryside, I know it well . . . Flat, with a few rivers meandering through it . . . I spent a whole summer in Gambier, Ohio." He laughed like a four-year-old at my outrage.

When Winters changed his literary opinions over his adult life, the changes went in one direction: he became more Wintersian. I wish he had entertained the notion that he might be wrong—but it was not his nature. On occasion I watched him tilt a little and was grateful. Once as I entered his office, I asked him what he was reading. "Hart Crane," he said and grumbled forcefully again about Crane's romantic pantheism. "Then why do you read him?" I asked. He answered shortly, "Because he's so beautiful."

About everything he cared for, he developed distinct

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ideas verging upon absolute dogmas. He smoked a tobacco, in his omnipresent pipe, which he declared the best tobacco there was—and he *proved* it by the authority of his assertion. His force of personality (voice, determined eye looking into your eye, plain speech invoking absolute knowledge) compelled assent. Alas, it was this tobacco he died of in 1968, tongue cancer with its gradual destruction of speech—this man of voice and mouth. Even when he was not smoking, he dangled the pipe from his lips, tarry stem rubbing against his tongue. After his first operation, he feared that he would lose speech. Janet Lewis remembered: ". . . they took a part of the tongue and then they brought some skin from the side of the mouth to give him a new tip." She remembered him saying: "If I can't read it, I can't teach—poetry."

He talked with love and authority of his Airedales. He never told me what he told Wilbur, but he believed in the uprightness of Black Jack, and he used dogs in argument. Once I defended a late Yeats poem that ends, "Man has invented death," by saying that only humans were conscious of death; Winters ended the discussion: "Dogs fear death."

From time to time Winters invited students to his house to watch boxing on his television set. He had boxed in his youth and enjoyed talking about pugilistic technique. It was entertaining to hear lectures about counterpunching from the voice that mostly spoke of caesuras and the absolute. I knew nothing about boxing and believed whatever he said. Philip Levine, who was a later fellow, had boxed himself—and watching fights with Winters mostly won the weekly bet; he felt that Winters never quite grasped the sport. Another old student remembers Winters's prediction that Sonny Liston would make short work of young Cassius Clay. Later Winters commented that all the experts were wrong: and he was an expert.

He was combative, this admirer of Black Jack and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bobo Olson; sometimes he spoke as if he glimpsed the world from a periscope. Once as I entered his house I saw a copy of *Critics and Criticism,* the collection of essays edited by R.S. Crane to assemble the Chicago Aristotelians. "Are you reading this?" He nodded and smiled with satisfaction; he read enough of each essay, he said, to be sure that he *had* them. He was combative, but Yvor Winters was not a potential subscriber to *Soldier of Fortune.* Casual readers of Winters assume that his conservatism extended from literature to politics. In his time he was a liberal Democrat, fierce in opposition to McCarthy and other demagogues of the right. Philip Levine called him "profoundly egalitarian in the way that only men and women of enormous self-confidence can afford to be." In terms of American domestic politics, he was an academic liberal. On the other hand, if we use political labels seriously, not as in American party politics but as indices of intellect and spirit, Winters was high Tory—with a Tory's respect for personal liberty and reverence for precedent and durability.

In my time, graduate students in English at Stanford were either for Winters or against him. For a few poets, it was possible to work with Winters for a year or so, learn something and leave Stanford without becoming beholden: Thom Gunn, Philip Levine, Donald Justice. Others were more profoundly his students but retained or regained their own egos and went their own ways: Cunningham, Bowers, Stephens, Pinsky, McMichael—and doubtless others. But some surrendered; some gave themselves over into vassalage. Certain strong teachers and writers develop not students but disciples. Everyone compares Leavis at Cambridge to Winters at Stanford, teachers and critics largely incomparable except in their relationship to students. Charles Olson was another. Intelligent leaders with power of character attract men and women who have a vocation for following, whose ecstasy is obedience or replication, whose bliss is to lose their identities in a leader or parent. Some of Winters's followers became head-nodders and wrote poems that mim-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

icked Winters's manner without achieving Winters's power. It was a defect in Winters that he approved of some imitators; but of course for him it seemed that the disciples were merely sensible. One can't avoid Roy Campbell's quatrain:

> You praise the firm restraint with which they write—
> I'm with you there, of course:
> They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
> But where's the bloody horse?

The power or energy in Winters's best poems derives from conflict between form and reason, on the one hand, and an opposing dark chaos (demonic possession, madness) on the other; form and concept strive mightily to overcome a powerful enemy. For the imitators, the cage that they fabricate, with inch-thick reinforced steel walls, incarcerates one mouse.

When I studied with him that year, I admired his helpful intelligence, his certainty, humor and brutal charm. But when I left in June, I knew that I would soon say or publish something he regarded as anathema; then he would write me a letter to fry my eyeballs. (". . . he was always much fiercer in his letters," Janet Lewis said in an interview, than "in the flesh.") I never considered staying at Stanford—but something happened late along that confirmed my necessity to bail out of this airplane. We attended a party at Winters's house late in Spring. In a crush of students and faculty, Winters asked a small favor; would I fill the ice bucket from the bag in the kitchen? Asking the favor, he addressed me as "son." When I heard the monosyllable, I went weak in the knees. *Geronimo!*

We knew a little of Winters's origins and personal history, and more has appeared in print since his death. There has been no biography, but perhaps when his letters become available someone will write his life. He was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

born in Chicago in 1900 but reared largely near Pasadena in the California that he came to love. His family moved back to Chicago when he was an adolescent, and there he first showed his precocity. In 1917, when he was still sixteen, Winters began undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago where he joined the Poetry Club that included Glenway Wescott and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. At the same time he met Harriet Monroe, founder and editor of *Poetry,* who invited him to the magazine's offices where the young Winters could consult the huge collection of modern poetry.

Shortly thereafter, this idyll ceased and Winters underwent a long period of isolation. Tuberculosis required him to spend the next three years in a sanatorium near Santa Fe, largely in bed, reading and writing when he could find the energy. "The disease filled the body," Winters wrote of Adelaide Crapsey who suffered from the same disease, "with a fatigue so heavy that it was an acute pain, pervasive and poisonous." Yet in 1919 Yvor Winters published six poems in *Poetry;* he wrote his first book of poems and most of his second while he was at the santorium. When he was released from the hospital in 1921 he taught public school in New Mexico, then resumed formal studies at the University of Colorado, concentrating on Latin, French and Spanish. He had read French and Spanish poems earlier, in his isolation; he once told me that some early experiments in prosody derived from misunderstanding French pronunciation of poetry.

Experimentalist he was, these years of his youth, appearing in avant-garde magazines like *Broom, Secession* and *This Quarter.* From New Mexico he corresponded with Marianne Moore, whom he admired, who mailed him books when she worked in the library. When she edited *The Dial,* Moore published his poems and one book review. The young Winters was devoted to the generation of American modernists, the fathers whom he would later dismember. He had good words for Eliot and Pound, at first, then quickly found fault. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moore, Wallace Stevens, and above all William Carlos Williams who became his mentors. But it is difficult to remain an artist, or to develop, as the follower of a talented and accomplished parental generation. Harold Bloom has noted and detailed the engines of conflict. Possibly it is more difficult when the remarkable generation consists of elder siblings; closeness of age exacerbates forms of rivalry. Winters and his contemporaries—Hart Crane and Allen Tate, both born a year before him—were eleven to twenty years younger than the great, crowded generation born mostly in the eighties of the previous century: Wallace Stevens 1879, William Carlos Williams 1883, Ezra Pound 1885, Marianne Moore 1887, T.S. Eliot 1888. Some poets of a sequent generation remained followers their whole lives, admirers of the elder brothers and sisters. (MacLeish was born in 1892.) Young males needed to rebel against the fathers or elder brothers if they themselves were to develop. Hart Crane, Allen Tate and Yvor Winters—a grumpy and volatile troika, these brothers—combatted with elder siblings. Thomas Parkinson has edited *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*—Tate's presence hovers over the book—and shows the young poets arguing, praising and blaming with all the partisanship of artists in their twenties. Out of intense friendship and rivalry among poets, much poetry derives.

History, including literary history, combines with the personal or accidental. It is impossible to understand Winters without taking account of the bitter isolation which tuberculosis conferred upon him—the personal accident—but I suspect that the generational literary struggle was just as determinant. Winters became a fierce and competitive rebel assaulting the poet-armies of unalterable modernism established above him. The later, conservative Winters is *more* rebellious than the young experimentalist. That he attacked modernism in the name of reason, abstraction, archaism and metrics is mere particularity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When he left Colorado he took his M.A. to the University of Idaho in Moscow, where he taught romance languages. By this time he had met and married Janet Lewis, but she remained in New Mexico because she also suffered from tuberculosis. He lived outside the town center, to allow room for the Airedales he already raised. He thought, read, wrote his poems, and corresponded widely—especially with Crane and Tate. And in Idaho he underwent an unsettling or terrifying experience which shaped his life. Or so it appears. This experience is recorded in Winters's autobiographical short story, "The Brink of Darkness." First published in *Hound and Horn* in 1932, it was revised for republication in 1947. By taking it as autobiographical I commit various heresies (other writers do the same, notably Terry Comito whose *In Defense of Winters* is the best book about him) but Winters wrote a story clearly consonant with known facts of his life; I suspect that he wanted or needed to leave this clue behind—a clue to the function throughout his life of what he called reason.

When Winters left Moscow for Stanford University and his Ph.D. in English, he found the short poem of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, its structure often based on logic; he found meter and scholasticism, rhetoric and the plain style, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle and the line of poets—Googe, Greville, Jonson, Herbert—who provided him his rebellious conservatism. He found stones for the edifice he spent his life building, which was the Castle of Reason. But what did he mean by *reason?* He told Janet Lewis he could not teach poetry without reading aloud; is reading aloud an act of reason? When he collected his first three books of criticism as *In Defense of Reason,* Winters raised eyebrows, for he is philosophically blunt, master of assertion and tirade, clear in his praise and blame—but he is more powerful than reasonable, more like Jeremiah than Aristotle. Sometimes we defend cool reason for hot reasons; we defend reason to attack madness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In "The Brink of Darkness," the dark is insanity. The protagonist boards with an old couple in their lonely house in the country; when the old woman dies, her widower leaves the house to the young protagonist who remains with the body for three days until the funeral. Left alone with his Airedales in this isolated place, his fear and anxiety mount. "I felt that I saw farther and farther into the events about me, that I perceived a new region of significance, even of sensation, extending a short distance behind that of which I had always been aware, suggesting the existence of far more than was even now perceptible." Details become stranger when the dogs run off and the man is alone. "One night after I had been watching the mice without moving for nearly an hour, I got up suddenly and went downstairs for a glass of water. . . . The light from the window fell on the snow outside. . . . Only, at the upper left-hand corner of the window there was darkness, a tangle of withered vines outside. . . . A slight motion caught my eye, and I glanced up at the darkened corner of the window to be fixed with horror. There, standing on the air outside the window, translucent, a few lines merely, and scarcely visible, was a face, my face, the eyes fixed upon my own . . ."

When the dogs return, the protagonist begins to regain composure by removing porcupine quills from one of them. ". . . my bed cover and my rugs were stained with blood." He remembers "over the past months," how he had been "disturbed, uncentered, and finally obsessed as by an insidious power. I remembered that I had read somewhere of a kind of Eastern demon who gains power over one only in proportion as one recognizes and fears him. I felt that I had been the victim of a deliberate and malevolent invasion. . . . I had begun to recover the limits of my old identity. I had begun this recovery at the time of the immersion in the brute blood of the bitch. The invading power I could not identify. I felt it near me still, but slowly receding."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Brink of Darkness" is affecting in its horror not because of literary invention but because of the author's intense feeling—which serves as a bloody footprint leading from the dark woods to the library stair. At the end, Winters says of his protagonist's condition: "It was as if there were darkness evenly underlying the brightness of the air, underlying everything, as if I might slip suddenly into it at any instant, and as if I held myself where I was by an act of the will from moment to moment." Forever after, in poems and in criticism, *will* is central to Winters—the will to reason that is alternative to madness. When he reprinted the story, late in his life, he added an explanation: "Winters says that this story is a study of the hypothetical possibility of a hostile supernatural world, and of the effect on the perceptions of a consideration of this possibility." The note tells us, "Once I felt captured by a hostile supernatural world." In the criticism, he alludes to demonic possession when he speaks of the Earl of Rochester; and he takes every opportunity to praise Robert Bridges's "Low Barometer," which enacts an experience of possession, terror and self-rescue.

Winters feared madness all his life. The right ideas, combined with willpower, could keep madness off. On the other hand, ideas like Hart Crane's succumbed to madness or even engendered it. In *Forms of Discovery,* he remarks, in the eighteenth century,

> a high incidence of madness among poets of more or less recognized talent: Collins, Gray, Chatterton, Smart, Blake, and others later; the same thing happens in other languages. A psychological theory which justifies the freeing of the emotions and which holds rational understanding in contempt appears to be sufficient to break the minds of a good many men with sufficient talent to take the theory seriously. Conversely, such a theory tends to equate irresponsible behavior and even madness with genius . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In *The Anatomy of Nonsense* in 1943, his chapter on Henry Adams, he speaks of his

> belief that a balance which is artificial, or which is, in my terms, a habit formed by willed perserverance deriving from rational understanding of the need for it, and which preserves one from madness, is in its own nature a good; for madness is in its own nature and quite obviously an evil.

Winters's life and work determined to avoid this evil.

Some of Winters's early experimental poetry remains readable after many decades. There are one-line poems imitated from Native American sources:

> Noon
>
> Did you move, in the sun?

There is also muscular free verse in the studied line of William Carlos Williams, but the bulk of his *Collected Poems* is rhymed, metered, abstract, willful and didactic.

> The poet's only bliss
> Is in cold certitude—
> Laurel, archaic, rude.

Sometimes Winters makes the mistakes he censored others for—technical laxities of forced rhyme, meter upheld by awkward word order and dead metaphor. This is the first stanza of "Defense of Empire":

> The nervous light above my door
> Towers high with blossoms; all their scent
> Is shaken with the climbing roar
> Of planes which thread the firmament.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Roar makes an animal noise, but there's nothing else that belongs to an animal, not even *scent* because the odor is florific. *Towers* is a commonplace extinct architectural metaphor; and *thread* is worse.

But we judge poets by their best work—or there are no good poets. Let the reader forget his objections to archaism, and observe the irritable Thomist fend off Christianity:

A Fragment

I cannot find my way to Nazareth.
I have had enough of this. Thy will is death,
And this unholy quiet is thy peace.
Thy will be done; and let discussion cease.

From the colloquial—"I have had enough of this"—to the magisterial closure, from allusion to assertion, Winters loads pages of feeling into four quick lines. To my mind his best poem is this one:

To the Holy Spirit

from a deserted graveyard in the Salinas Valley

Immeasurable haze:
The desert valley spreads
Up golden river-beds
As if in other days.
Trees rise and thin away,
And past the trees, the hills,
Pure line and shade of dust,
Bear witness to our wills:
We see them, for we must;
Calm in deceit, they stay.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

High noon returns the mind
Upon its local fact:
Dry grass and sand; we find
No vision to distract.
Low in the summer heat,
Naming old graves, are stones
Pushed here and there, the seat
Of nothing, and the bones
Beneath are similar:
Relics of lonely men,
Brutal and aimless, then,
As now, irregular.

These are thy fallen sons,
Thou whom I try to reach.
Thou whom the quick eye shuns,
Thou dost elude my speech.
Yet when I go from sense
And trace thee down in thought,
I meet thee, then, intense,
And know thee as I ought.
But thou art mind alone,
And I, alas, am bound
Pure mind to flesh and bone,
And flesh and bone to ground.

These had no thought: at most
Dark faith and blinding earth.
Where is the trammeled ghost?
Was there another birth?
Only one certainty
Beside thine unfleshed eye,
Beside the spectral tree,
Can I discern: these die.
All of this stir of age,
Though it elude my sense
Into what heritage
I know not, seems to fall,
Quiet beyond recall,
Into irrelevance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ignore our conventional Mosaic injunctions against "thee," "thou" and "thy." Hear the firm control of this trimeter line; hear the adamant will to truth, the fierce necessity to acknowledge perceived reality however desolate; reside in Winters's resolved art.

This poem belongs to the late forties or early fifties, when Winters did his best work. By the middle of the fifties, he was writing little. When I asked why, he told me—sharply; I wished I had not asked—that he would write nothing until he had something new to say. At some point I inveigled George Plimpton into assigning me a *Paris Review* interview with Winters. I was not surprised when Winters refused: if he had things to remark about poetry, he would write an essay.

My son Andrew was born in April at the Stanford Hospital. A few days later, when I picked up my mail, I found an envelope from Winters enclosing an epigram in tetrameter couplets called something like "On a Fair Infant So Fortunate as to Be Born in California." The epigram, which has been lost, continued our teasing about New England and California. Before Andrew's birth I entertained the notion that the child arriving was my replacement, therefore implying my death. We named him after my father and me, and my morbid notion intensified. A first line entered my mind, and in two or three weeks I wrote a poem which Winters liked. This is the poem as I print it now:

My son, my executioner,
  I take you in my arms,
Quiet and small and just astir
  And whom my body warms.

Sweet death, small son, our instrument
  Of immortality,
Your cries and hungers document
  Our bodily decay.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We twenty-five and twenty-two,
  Who seemed to live forever,
Observe enduring life in you
  And start to die together.

At first I called it "Epigenethlion," concocted Greek that I stole from an Andrew-poem written by another student. *The New Yorker* could not discover the word in the New York Public Library and printed the poem as "First Child." In the magazine and in my first book, it concluded with a fourth stanza which Winters might have saved me from:

I take into my arms the death
  Maturity exacts
And name with my imperfect breath
  The mortal paradox.

"Maturity" is cant. An ironic eye, reading the modesty of "my imperfect breath," should cock a fierce eyebrow. The trite rhyme of *breath* with *death* seals the climax in the beeswax of platitude. (On the other hand, *exacts/paradox* is the cat's pajamas.) Blunt abstractions and clichéd rhymes devilled Wintersian poems—and sometimes Winters's own.

That spring, candidates for the next year's fellowship sent manuscripts to Stanford. Winters asked current fellows to read these poems and report. A close friend whom I admired submitted a blank verse narrative which I praised to Winters. Winters saw nothing in it and the subject was closed. But I had recruited another candidate. While I was at Oxford, Thom Gunn was emerging at Cambridge, he was first revealed on John Lehman's BBC literary magazine "New Soundings." We connected, Gunn visited Oxford, and we corresponded. When he wanted to come to the United States, I suggested that he apply for a Stanford Fellowship. Connecting Gunn and Winters was not farfetched; Gunn wrote a vigorous iambic line in praise of energy, and his poems

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were not afraid to think. Of course they were romantic, but Winters enjoyed the notion of tearing a poet down and building him up again.

When Winters chose Gunn as one of the next year's fellows, he started to worry. He had never before brought a fellow from England, and he developed a fatherly concern for the young Englishman he had invited. Because I knew Gunn, Winters telephoned me as worries and solutions occurred to him. "Probably he can't drive. Can he drive? How will he get around? Would he ride a bike? I've got an old bike . . ."

Toward the end of our stay I asked Janet Lewis and Yvor Winters to dinner. We had been to his house many times: cookouts, parties, the Friday night fights. He was reluctant to accept but when faced with a situation requiring conventional manners, he felt alien or diffident. Although he wanted to say no, his awkwardness would not let him. When they arrived, we drank bourbon, had dinner on the porch and returned to sit in the living room. After five minutes, Winters leapt up ready to leave, a quick departure by conventional standards; conventionally I protested. Immediately Winters collapsed onto the sofa again, sighing and looking depressed. The next time he suggested departure I let him go. Years later I discovered: a friend who knew Winters better than I did told me that for years, whenever Winters ate outside his own house, he was sick to his stomach. He felt comfortable only in his own house or at his Stanford office. Never again would he attend the Kenyon School of Letters, in the New England countryside of Gambier, Ohio. In 1959 I wrote asking if he would give a paper at the 1960 MLA. I chaired the Poetics group that year; John Hollander and Paul de Man gave papers, and Winters would have completed an eldritch trio. He answered in January of 1960 and demurred characteristically by Absolute Statement: he would never, ever, travel anywhere for the rest of his life. He did, actually—to attend his daughter's wedding; rumor has it that he flew all night, both ways, to minimize his time away from home.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In June of 1954 I drove East from Palo Alto to Connecticut, my family flying ahead. I drove the Morris Minor coast to coast solo in three and a half days. Not sleeping a great deal, I went over my year, feeling loyal and affectionate, full of things I learned from him—but without illusions about a future relationship. In 1956, when I had published a book of poems and some essays, the letter arrived that excoriated me: it went on and on, with much anger and much punitive rhetoric, with accusations of literary and moral fault that were accurate enough. Although I had expected it, the letter was upsetting; on the whole it helped me to align or realign both purpose and deportment. He was often wrong, I think, about particulars of taste and motive; he was right about large matter.

Only once after leaving California did I see him—a year after his letter, at his daughter's wedding in Cambridge. At the reception we talked together, friendly enough, and joked about California and New England. A few years later I was member of a jury convened by th Yale University Library to choose the winner of the Bollingen Prize. As I recollect, Louise Bogan, Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, and I favored Winters. My last connection with Yvor Winters was a telephone call from the office of the Director of the Yale Library in Connecticut to Portola Road in Los Altos—home of Airedales, former goat house. The director told Winters that the Yale Library had just awarded him the Bollingen Prize. There was a pause as Winters sorted things out: the *East* was giving him a prize—Yale University of the Ivy League, where they thought he was lower than the carpet. When the director handed me the phone, without revealing my identity, I said my name and congratulated him on the prize. I heard relief in his voice, as the mystery was solved. I heard pleasure as well—no one wholly disdains the laurel—when he said, "Oh, *you*'re there, are you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Bernardine Connelly is currently the writer-in-residence at St. Albans School in Washington, D.C. "Bait & Switch" is her first published story.
Susan Minot is the author of *Monkeys* and *Lust & Other Stories.*
Richard Stern's "Del Plunko Performs" is taken from *Shares,* a collection of stories to be published by Delphinium Books in 1992. It is his sixteenth book. In 1985 he received the Medal of Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
Paul West is the author of many novels, including *Rat Man of Paris, The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg, Caliban's Filibuster* and *The Women of Whitechapel. Portable People,* a collection of biographical sketches, was recently published by Paris Review Editions. His most recent novel, *A Sleep and a Forgetting,* from which "Blind White Fish in Belgium" is excerpted, will be published by Random House in 1992.

POETRY

Elizabeth Alexander's first collection of poems, *The Venus Hottentot,* was published in 1990. She teaches creative writing and African-American literature at the University of Chicago.
Bruce Bawer's first volume of poetry, *Coast to Coast,* and *Prophets and Professors,* a collection of essays on poetry, are both forthcoming from Story Line Press.
Georgi Belev was born in Bulgaria. His poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review* and the *Boston Review.* He is a critic, the author of five books of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poetry, and three plays and has translated several major American poets. On the eve of Bulgaria's recent elections Belev participated in a poetry reading which drew a cheering crowd of over two thousand. His translator, **Lisa Sapinkopf,** won first prize in the American Translators' Association's 1991 competition for *Clay and Star,* an anthology of contemporary Bulgarian poetry which she translated with Georgi Belev. She has also won the Columbia University Translation Center Prize for her translations of poetry by Yves Bonnefoy. Her work has appeared in *Poetry, Partisan Review, Ploughshares* and numerous other journals.

Christopher Benfey's poems have appeared in *Ploughshares, Boston Review* and other journals. He has recently completed *The Double Life of Stephen Crane,* to be published by Knopf in 1992.

April Bernard's first book of poems, *Blackbird Bye Bye,* won the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. Her novel, *Pirate Jenny,* was published in 1990. The poems in this issue are taken from her forthcoming collection, *Psalms.*

Michael Burkard's collections of poems include *The Fires They Kept, Fictions from the Self, Ruby for Grief* and *My Secret Boat,* a notebook of prose and poems.

Martin Edmunds won the 1991 "Discovery"/*The Nation* Poetry Contest. His poems appeared in the anthology *Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets,* as well as in *Agni, Crosswinds* and *The Nation.*

Jim Elledge has published two collections of poems: *Nothing Nice* and *Various Envies.* His poems have appeared in the *Denver Review, Antioch Review, The Texas Review* and many other journals. His most recent project was *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City,* which he edited for the University of Michigan Press. He teaches at Illinois State University.

Caroline Finkelstein is a past recipient of awards from the NEA, the Vermont Council on the Arts, and the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation. She is the author of a poetry collection, *Windows Facing East.* Her most recent publications have been in *Tikkun, Verse* and *Poetry.*

Lucy Grealy's poems have been published in the London *Times Literary Supplement* and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Everyday Alibis,* was published in 1989. She will spend the 1991–1992 academic year as a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe College.

Zbigniew Herbert was born in Lvov, Poland in 1924, and fought in the Polish Resistance in World War II. His work has appeared in two translations, both entitled *Selected Poems.* His translators, **John** and **Bogdana Carpenter,** translated Herbert's *Still Life With a Bridle,* published by Ecco Press this fall. Bogdana Carpenter is a professor in the Slavic department of the University of Michigan. John Carpenter is currently writing a book on the literature of World War II. They won the Witter Bynner Translation Award in 1979 for the *Selected Poems of Zbigniew Herbert.*

Daryl Hine's book of poetry, *Postscripts,* was published in January, 1992 by Knopf. His most recent collection, *Ovid's Heroines,* was published this fall by Yale University Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Roald Hoffmann is a chemist at Cornell University. He has published two books of poetry: *The Metamict State* and *Gaps and Verges.*

Andrew Hudgins has published in *The New Yorker, Southern Review* and *The Hudson Review.* He is the author of *Saints and Strangers.*

William Logan's poetry collections include *Sullen Weedy Lakes, Difficulty,* and *Sad-faced Man.* He has won the Peter I.B. Lavan Award of the Academy of American Poets and the 1989 citation for excellence in reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle.

Alan Michael Parker's poems have appeared in *Boulevard, The New Republic* and *The New Yorker.* He teaches creative writing at Rutgers University and literature at the Parsons School of Design.

Anthony Robbins' poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review, Southern Review* and in *New Directions* anthologies.

Len Roberts's most recent book of poems, *Black Wings,* received the National Poetry Series Award in 1989. He is presently a Guggenheim Fellow in poetry and spent the summer of 1991 in Hungary on a Fulbright translation fellowship.

Kuroda Saburo was born in Hiroshima in 1919. He was an early editor of *The Waste Land,* the foremost journal of postwar poetry in Japan. The poems translated here are from his collection *With Little Yuri.* He died in 1980. His translator, **Bruno Peter Navasky,** has spent the past two years in residence at Nagoya University, with the support of the Japanese Ministry of Education. He is currently working on several translations, including a collection of poems by children.

Stephen Sandy's most recent books are *Man in the Open Air* and *Riding to Greylock.* He is also the author of two collections of poetry, *Stresses in the Peaceable Kingdom* and *Roofs.* His poems have appeared in *The Atlantic* and *Missouri Review.*

Peter Schmitt's first collection of poems, *Country Airport,* was recently published by Copper Beech Press. His poems have appeared in *Poetry* and *Southern Review.* He won the "Discovery"/*The Nation* Prize for Poetry in 1988.

B.A. St. Andrews, a recent fellow at Yaddo, has published poems in *The New Yorker, The Gettysburg Review* and *Commonweal.* She teaches creative writing and humanities at the SUNY Health Science Center in Syracuse, New York.

Charles Tomlinson's most recent books are *Annunciations* and *Selected Poems.* He is currently editing *Eros Englished,* an anthology of erotic verse translated from Greek and Latin.

Anne Winters is the translator of *Salamander: Selected Poems of Robert Marteau* and the author of *The Key to the City,* a collection of poems. She is currently teaching at Northwestern University.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FEATURE

Donald Hall was the first poetry editor of *The Paris Review*. His most recent publications are *Old and New Poems*, a collection, and *Seasons at Eagle Pond*, a volume of essays.

INTERVIEWS

Frederick Busch (Reynolds Price interview) has recently published two novels: *Closing Arguments* and *Harry and Catherine*. He is the Edgar Fairchild Professor of Literature at Colgate University.
James Linville (Harold Brodkey interview) is the managing editor of *The Paris Review*. Vanessa Friedman, an editorial assistant at *Vanity Fair*, and Daniel Kunitz, an editorial assistant at *The Paris Review*, made invaluable contributions in the editing of the interview text.

ART

Nayland Blake was born in New York in 1960, and lives in San Francisco. Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Petersburg Gallery, New York; and Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco.
David McDermott was born in Hollywood, California, in 1952, and lives in New York. **Peter McGough** was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1958, and lives in New York. Their collaborative paintings and photographs have been shown at Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York; and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Alexis Smith was born in Los Angeles in 1949 and lives in Los Angeles. Exhibitions of her collages and installations have been seen at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Brooklyn Museum, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review is pleased to announce its 1991 prizewinners:

The Aga Khan Prize for Fiction has been awarded to Jeffrey Eugenides for "The Virgin Suicides" appearing in issue 117.
The Bernard F. Conners Prize for Poetry has been awarded to Donald Hall for "Museum of Clear Ideas" to be published in a future issue.
The John Train Humor Prize has been awarded to Dan Leone for his story "Spinach" to be published in the spring issue, 1992.

"The great gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination."

—Elizabeth Hardwick,
in *The Paris Review*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE PARIS REVIEW PRINT AND POSTER SERIES

ALEX KATZ

1991, limited edition of 100; 42″ × 30″

Anuszkiewicz • Christo • Chryssa • Clemente • Crash d'Arcangelo • Paul Davis • Dine • Jimmy Ernst Janet Fish • Glaser • Frankenthaler • Freilicher • Haring Arnold Hoffman • Hockney • deKooning • Indiana Kanowitz • Krushenick • Katz • Kelly • Kushner • Lewitt Lindner • Lichtenstein • MacConnel • Marca-Relli Marisol • Motherwell • Salle • Nevelson • Rauschenberg Steve Poleskie • Oldenburg • Rosenquist • Ortman Saroyan • Shahn • Stamos • Sultan • Trova • Steinberg Summers • Ungerer • Vicente • Warhol • Wilson • Wesley Winters • Youngerman

For catalogue or information write: Joan Krawczyk,
The Paris Review, 541 E. 72nd St., New York, NY 10021.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review Put On

Brand new Paris Review tee shirts. Navy blue with white lettering and symbol or white with black lettering and symbol at only $15.00 apiece. Sizes: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large.

THE PARIS REVIEW • 45-39 171 Place • Flushing, N.Y. 11358

White with black. Quantity: _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Ex. Large ☐

Blue with white. Quantity: _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Ex. Large ☐

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....

STATE..... ZIP.....

PAYMENT MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER

(New York State residents please add tax)

MASTERCARD/VISA CARD # _____ EXP. DATE _____

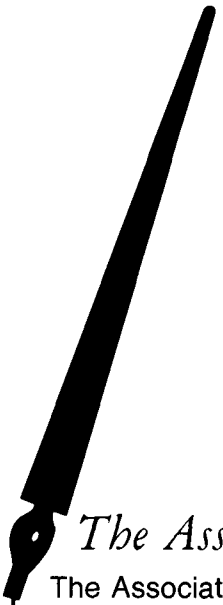
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review Booksellers Advisory Board

THE PARIS REVIEW BOOKSELLERS ADVISORY BOARD is a group of owners and managers of independent bookstores from around the world who have agreed to share with us their knowledge and expertise.

STUART BRENT, *Stuart Brent Books, Chicago, IL*
ANDREAS BROWN, *Gotham Bookmart, New York, NY*
TIMOTHY CARRIER, *Odegard Books, St. Paul, MN*
ROBERT CONTANT, *St. Mark's Bookstore, New York, NY*
JOSEPH GABLE, *Borders Bookshop, Ann Arbor, MI*
MARGIE GHIZ, *Midnight Special, Santa Monica, CA*
JAMES HARRIS, *Prairie Lights Bookstore, Iowa City, IA*
ODILE HELLIER, *Village Voice, Paris, France*
RICHARD HOWORTH, *Square Books, Oxford, MS*
KRIS KLEINDIENST, *Left Bank Books, St. Louis, MO*
FRANK KRAMER, *Harvard Bookstore, Cambridge, MA*
TERRI MERZ AND ROBIN DIENER, *Chapters, Washington, DC*
PETER PHILBROOK, *Books & Company, New York, NY*
MICHAEL POWELL, *Powell's Bookstore, Portland, OR*
DONALD PRETARI, *Black Oak Books, Berkeley, CA*
ENCARNITA QUINLAN, *Endicott Booksellers, New York, NY*
JACQUES RIEUX, *Stone Lion Bookstore, Fort Collins, CO*
LEWIS ROSENBAUM, *Guild Books, Chicago, IL*
ANDREW ROSS, *Cody's, Berkeley, CA*
HENRY SCHWAB, *Bookhaven, New Haven, CT*
RICK SIMONSON, *Eliot Bay, Seattle, WA*
LOUISA SOLANO, *Grolier Bookshop, Cambridge, MA*
DAVID UNOWSKY, *Hungry Mind Bookstore, St. Paul, MN*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The Associates of The Paris Review

The Associates of The Paris Review are those organizations and individuals whose support helps make publication of The Paris Review possible.

ALAN & ARLENE ALDA
BROOKE ASTOR
DR. CHARLES ATWOOD & JO ANN PICCIONE ATWOOD
BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB, INC.
ETHELYN ATHA CHASE
MARGARET COOK
COUNCIL OF LITERARY MAGAZINES AND PRESSES
SAGE AND JOHN COWLES
DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
HAYDEN (SIDD) FINCH
MARIANNE GERSCHEL
THE BERNARD & ALVA GIMBEL FOUNDATION
THOMAS H. GUINZBURG
DRUE HEINZ
DR. WILLIAM KATZ & SUSAN STANTON KATZ
MATTEL ELECTRONICS
NEIL A. McCONNELL
NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS
PAUL NEWMAN & JOANNE WOODWARD
WILLIAM S. PALEY
THE PLAYBOY FOUNDATION
HAMILTON F. RICHARDSON
DELIA ROLLOW
EDWARD ST. GEORGE
SCRIPPS-HOWARD FOUNDATION
FRANCIS ALBERT SINATRA
THE STANTON FOUNDATION
FRANK & DOMNA STANTON
EDWARD S. STEWART
H. S. TRAISON
MRS. JOHN HAY WHITNEY

Inquiries about becoming an Associate should be directed to
The Editors, The Paris Review, 541 East 72nd St., New York, New York 10021

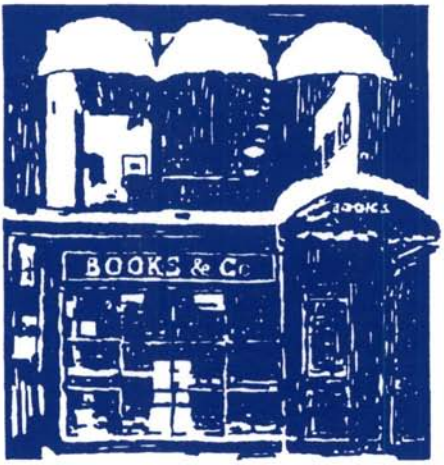
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Available now from the Flushing office
BACK ISSUES OF THE PARIS REVIEW

No.			
	18	Ernest Hemingway Interview; Giacometti Portfolio; Philip Roth.	$25.00
	24	Boris Pasternak and Robert Frost interviews; Gina Bernault.	9.50
	25	Robert Lowell Interview; Hughes Rudd, X. J. Kennedy.	9.50
	26	Marianne Moore and Ilya Ehrenburg Interviews; Malcolm Lowry, Mailer..	9.50
	30	S. J. Perelman and Evelyn Waugh Interviews; Niccolo Tucci, 22 poets.	9.50
	33	Lillian Hellman Interview; R. V. Cassill, Jeremy Larner, Robert Creeley.	8.00
	34	De Beauvoir and Yevtushenko Interviews; Harry Mathews, Gary Snyder.	8.00
	35	William Burroughs Interview; Irvin Faust, Leonard Gardner, Ron Padgett.	8.00
	36	Saul Bellow Interview; William Styron, Robert Duncan, Barbara Guest.	8.00
	37	Allen Ginsberg and Cendrars Interviews; Charles Olson, Gary Snyder.	8.00
	38	Arthur Miller Interview; "Lowry in England," James Salter, Leroi Jones.	8.00
	39	Edward Albee and Harold Pinter Interviews; e. e. cummings Letters.	8.00
	41	Vladimir Nabokov Interview; Kenward Elmslie, Philip Whalen, John Ashbery.	8.00
	44	Creeley and I. B. Singer Interviews; James Salter, Diane di Prima.	7.00
	45	Updike Interview; Hoagland Journal; Veitch, Brautigan, Padgett, O'Hara.	9.50
	46	John Dos Passos Interview; Thomas M. Disch, Ted Berrigan, Kenneth Koch.	7.00
	47	Robert Graves Interview; Ed Sanders, Robert Creeley, Tom Clark.	7.00
	49	Charles Olson Interview; Frank O'Hara, James Salter.	7.00
	50	Georges Sefens Interview; John Ashbery, Kenward Elmslie, James Schuyler.	7.00
	62	James Wright Interview; Joe Brainard, Christo Portfolio.	7.00
	63	J. P. Donleavy and Steinbeck Interviews; Louis Simpson, Robert Bly.	7.00
	64	Kingsley Amis and P. G. Wodehouse Interviews; Diane Vreuls, Thomas M. Disch.	10.00
	66	Stanley Elkin Interview; Richard Stern, W. S. Merwin.	7.00
	67	Cheever and Wheelock Interviews; Maxine Kumin, Aram Saroyan.	7.00
	68	William Goyen Interview; John Updike, William Stafford.	7.00
	69	Kurt Vonnegut Interview; William Burroughs, Ed Sanders, John Logan.	7.00
	70	William Gass Interview; Peter Handke, William S. Wilson, Galway Kinnell.	7.00
	72	Richard Wilbur Interview; Joy Williams, Norman Dubie.	7.00
	73	James M. Cain and Anthony Powell Interviews; Dallas Wiebe, Bart Midwood.	7.00
	74	Didion, Drabble and Oates Interviews; Vincente Aleixandre Portfolio; Max Apple.	7.00
	75	Gardner, Shaw Interviews; Handke Journal, Dubus, Salter, Gunn, Heaney.	7.00
	76	Ignatow, Levi, Rhys Interviews; Jean Rhys Memoir Louis Simpson.	7.00
	77	Stephen Spender Interview; Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, Philip Levine.	7.00
	78	Andrei Voznesensky Interview; Voznesensky/Ginsberg Conversation; Edie Sedgwick Memoir; T. Coraghessan Boyle, Tom Disch, Odysseus Elytis.	7.00
	79	*25th ANNIVERSARY: R. West Interview; Paris Review Sketchbook; Hemingway,* Faulkner, Southern, Gass, Carver, Dickey, Schuyler, Gellhorn/Spender/Jackson Letters.	12.00
	80	Barthelme, Bishop Interviews; Reinaldo Arenas, J. D. Salinger Feature.	7.00
	81	T. Williams, P. Bowles Interviews; Wiebe, Atwood, Federman Fiction; Montale Poetry.	18.00
	82	C. Fuentes, G. Garcia Marquez Interviews; Cortazar, Joy Williams, Kincaid Fiction.	7.00
	83	J. Brodsky, S. Kunitz Interviews; Gerald Stern/B. F. Conners Prize Poetry.	9.50
	84	P. Larkin, J. Merrill Interviews; T. C. Boyle, Edmund White Fiction.	7.00
	85	M. Cowley, W. Maxwell Interviews; H. Brodkey, Bill Knott Poetry.	7.00
	86	Caldwell, Travers Interviews; Nova, Mailer, McInerney Fiction; Poetry Feature.	10.00
	87	H. Boll, Infante Interviews; Milosz, C. K. Williams Poetry.	7.00
	88	Gordimer, Carver Interviews; Hill, Nemerov Poetry; McCourt, Davis Fiction.	7.00
	89	James Laughlin, May Sarton Interviews; F. Bidart Poetry, Zelda Fitzgerald Feature.	7.00
	90	John Ashbery, James Laughlin Interviews; C. Wright Poetry; E. Garber Fiction.	7.00
	91	J. Baldwin, E. Wiesel Interviews; Morand, R. Wilson Fiction; Clampitt Poetry.	7.00
	92	M. Kundera, E. O'Brien, A. Koestler Interviews; E. L. Doctorow Fiction.	7.00
	93	THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY: Roth, Ionesco, Cortazar Interviews; Rush, Boyle Fiction; Brodsky, Carver Poetry.	7.00
	94	J. G. Ballard, R. Fitzgerald Interviews; L. Woiwode Fiction, Warhol Photo Feature.	9.50
	95	J. Barth, W. Meredith Interviews; Erdrich, Gurganus, Yourgrau Fiction; Hacker Poetry.	9.50
	96	Hardwick, Lehmann Interviews; Auster Fiction; Olds, Kinnell Poetry; Spender Features.	9.50
	97	Hollander, McGuane Interviews; Dickey, Kosinski Features; Dixon Fiction, Wright Poetry.	7.00
	98	L. Edel, R. Stone Interviews; R. Stone Fiction; L. Edel Feature.	8.00
	99	A. Robbe-Grillet, K. Shapiro Interviews; E. Tallent Fiction, D. Hall Poetry.	7.00
	100	DOUBLE HUNDREDTH: Hersey, Irving Interviews; Gordimer, Munro Fiction; Merrill, Milosz Poetry.	10.00
	103	Gray, Percy Interviews; Jas. Jones Feature; Styron Fiction; Brodsky, Dove Poetry.	7.00
	104	Brookner, Taylor Interviews; Kittredge Fiction; Levine, Wright Poetry; Beckett Feature.	7.00
	105	Calisher, Gaddis Interviews; B. Okri Fiction; A. Zagajewski Poetry.	7.00
	106	THIRTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY: Lessing, Yourcenar Interviews; C. Smith Fiction; Logue Poetry; Styron Feature.	10.00
	108	A. Hecht, E. White Interviews; C. Baxter, J. Kauffman Fiction; S. Olds Poetry.	7.00
	109	Mortimer, Stoppard Interviews; Burroughs, Minot Fiction; Mathews, Simic Poetry.	7.00
	110	Davies, Trevor Interviews; Boyle, Johnson, O'Brien Fiction; Tomlinson Poetry.	7.00
	111	Fowles, Fugard, Spencer Interviews; Tucci, Gurganus Fiction; Proust, Rilke Translations.	7.00
	112	Kennedy, Skvorecky Interviews; Malamud, Maspéro Fiction; Perec, Pinsky Poetry.	7.00
	113	Frisch, Puig, Wright Interviews; Banville, Gordimer Fiction; Graham, Hirsch Poetry.	7.00
	114	Sarraute, Settle Interviews; Matthiessen, P. West Fiction; F. Wright Poetry.	7.00
	115	Murdoch, Stegner Interviews; Bass Fiction; Laughlin Poetry; Merwin Feature.	7.00
	116	Angelou, Vargas Llosa Interviews; Perec Fiction; Ashbery Poetry; Stein Feature.	7.00
	117	Atwood, Pritchett Interviews; R. Price, Stern Fiction; Kizer, Logue Poetry.	7.00
	118	*Bloom, Wolfe Interviews; Tolstaya Fiction; Ashbery Poetry; Carver, Burgess Features.*	6.00
	119	Grass, Paz Interviews; M. McCarthy Feature; DeMarinis Fiction; Bonnefoy, Hacker Poetry	9.50
	120	Hall, Morris Interviews; Milosz Feature; Brodkey, Mailer Fiction	7.00

Please add $2.00 for postage and handling of up to 2 issues; $3.25 for 3 to 5.
Payment should accompany order. For orders outside the U.S. please double the shipping costs. Payments must be in U.S. currency. **Address orders to: 45-39 171 Place, Flushing, N.Y. 11358**
MASTERCARD/VISA # _____ **EXP. DATE** _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"The one way of tolerating existence is to lose oneself in literature as in a perpetual orgy."

—Gustave Flaubert,
in a letter, 1858

B·O·O·K·S
& Co.

939 Madison Avenue
New York City 10021

'phone (212) 737·1450

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED